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# THAT OTHERS MAY LIVE: THE COLD WAR SACRIFICE OF ELLENTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

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THAT OTHERS MAY LIVE:  
THE COLD WAR SACRIFICE OF ELLENTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
History

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by  
Samuel Thomas Ritchie  
May 2009

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Accepted by:  
Richard Saunders Jr., Committee Chair  
Rod Andrew Jr.  
H. Roger Grant

## **ABSTRACT**

The forced evacuation of Ellenton, South Carolina, beginning in November 1950 was the direct result of increasing international tension following the Soviet acquisition of an atomic weapon. Facing the loss of the American monopoly on nuclear weapons and an increasing Communist threat, the Truman administration authorized the construction of a nuclear facility near Ellenton, South Carolina, which would prove vital in the development of a hydrogen bomb. The people of Ellenton and the surrounding towns of Dunbarton, Meyers Mill, Robbins, and Leigh were required to sacrifice their homes and communities to provide land for the Savannah River Plant. The reaction of Ellentonians to this decision, and their response to the problems which accompanied it, sheds light on the ways in which the identity of the American South was changing in the years following the Second World War. Likewise, the response of their neighbors to the news of the coming nuclear facility exposes the rapidly changing economic situation in the South during the postwar era. Once fiercely resistant to federal intervention, the people of Ellenton and its surrounding communities showed a willingness to do their part in strengthening national security that suggests they recognized American problems as their own and reveals the extent to which the American South was being reintegrated into the greater United States in the early 1950s.

## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to my parents, Mike and Carolyn, and to my brothers, Michael and Joseph. Without their love and support, this would not have been possible.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to thank Dr. Richard Saunders, Dr. Rod Andrew, and Dr. Roger Grant for their contributions to this thesis. Without their advisement and patience, the completion of this thesis would have been difficult at best. Throughout the course of my studies at Clemson University, they have provided support and guidance which has proven invaluable.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Historians of the Cold War often focus on political leaders and foreign policy decisions. Much analysis has been devoted to leaders such as Harry Truman and Nikita Khrushchev, while the decision-making behind the nuclear arms race and the Cuban Missile Crisis has been documented at length. Perhaps it is natural that historians of the first truly global crisis would focus on the most powerful individuals in the world and the decisions they made in the face of increasing political pressure and growing threats from their opponents; the Cold War proved to be an era in which the fate of the world rested on the shoulders of a select few. And yet, to focus solely on the leaders who guided the world through this dangerous age is to ignore the impact that the conflict had on the ordinary people whose lives hung in the balance.

Similarly, a great deal of the history of the American South is devoted to the ways in which the region was unique and separated from the rest of the Union. This approach is often well-suited as the South was a fiercely insulated and stubbornly unique area well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the years following the Second World War, however, the South experienced an age of industrialization and reintegration into the larger nation. While the region certainly did not transform overnight, there were a number of changes that swept across the South that signaled a new direction for the region, most notably a new identity born out of the sacrifices of World War II. Lost in the discussion of continued segregation and fierce resistance to social change is the fact that Southerners began to identify with problems that extended beyond the region and recognized American concerns as their own.

The contrasting focal points of these two areas of history have led the history of the Cold War era in the South to go unexplored to a certain degree. Southerners experienced the same fear and paranoia that gripped the rest of the United States; the Soviet menace posed a threat to the nation without regards for any regional differences that existed. The South played a crucial role in the nuclear arms race, with the nuclear facility at Oak Ridge, Tennessee, paving the way for the tritium-producing Savannah River Site in South Carolina. While Southerners may have been weary of federal intervention and Yankee influence in the region, the threat of Soviet aggression forced cooperation between the South and the rest of the United States. When combined with a region-wide push for industrialization, the dangers posed by the Soviet Union hastened the reintegration of the South into the greater United States.

The town of Ellenton, South Carolina, disappeared on March 1, 1952. This disappearance was not the result of a natural disaster, nor was it caused by an enemy force. In an effort to stave off what appeared to be an endlessly encroaching Communist threat, Ellenton and its smaller neighbors Dunbarton and Meyers Mill were evacuated by the federal government to make room for a facility that would produce materials for thermonuclear weapons. The United States had lost its nuclear monopoly in 1949, prompting a decision by President Harry Truman to proceed with the development of a hydrogen bomb. In order to construct this weapon, a new nuclear facility was needed to produce tritium. After a thorough site selection process, the Atomic Energy Commission chose a site covering portions of Aiken, Allendale, and Barnwell counties to house the



new facility. As a result of the plant's construction, nearly 7,000 people in rural South Carolina were forced from their land, never to return.

Ellenton was founded in 1873 as a result of the expanding Port Royal Railroad. To complete the railway from Port Royal, South Carolina, to Augusta, Georgia, the Port Royal Railroad placed tracks on the plantation of James Robert Dunbar, Jr. in 1870. When Dunbar provided land for streets around the railroad in 1873, Mr. Millet, superintendent of railroad construction, named the area after Dunbar's young daughter Ellen. Ellen's Town, later known as Ellenton, was quickly populated by farmers in the nearby communities which sought to benefit from the railroad.

While the town would not appear on the census until 1900, Ellenton grew rapidly in its first years. A post office was established almost immediately by James Randolph Dunbar, who served as the first postmaster. The farmers that populated the area organized the Ellenton Agricultural Club to increase their knowledge of farming techniques and new machinery.<sup>1</sup> As the town grew, wealthier families began to construct fine homes within the town rather than on the outskirts.<sup>2</sup> With farmers in the area providing a strong economic base, a number of merchants soon occupied the town.

Despite its small size and relative isolation, Ellenton experienced the hardships of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century along with the rest of the country. The Bank of Western Carolina in Ellenton folded in 1931, a victim of the economic collapse of the Great

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<sup>1</sup> Tonya Algerine Browder and Richard David Brooks, *Memories of Home: Reminiscences of Ellenton*, Savannah River Archaeological Research Heritage Series 2, Occasional Papers of the Savannah River Archaeological Research Program Community History Project (Columbia: Savannah River Archaeological Research Program, South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of South Carolina, 1996), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 27.

Depression. The bank was soon occupied by the post office, which remained in the building until the town's death. During World War II, Ellentonians helped make bandages for the war effort. These shared experiences proved to be incredibly important in reshaping the identity of Ellentonians.

The Cassels family operated Cassels Company, Inc., affectionately known as the Long Store due to the building's unique shape, which served as the central hub for the town. The Long Store provided everything the residents of Ellenton could hope to purchase, from groceries and gasoline to medicine and farm supplies. In addition to the goods sold at the Long Store, the building housed the town bank and the telephone exchange. The Long Store also served as a gathering place and a source of news for residents. Mike Cassels, who operated the Long Store until the town's death, served as de facto mayor in the town and was as an important leader in the community.

Throughout much of Ellenton's history, its residents experienced a relatively quiet existence.<sup>3</sup> Ellentonians enjoyed the isolation of their community and made the most of the natural rewards that the area offered, with the Three Runs Creek in particular providing recreation through swimming and fishing. Likewise, hunting proved a popular past-time in the area as Ellentonians sought to use their abundant land as a source of recreation. Nearby Augusta, Georgia, provided shopping and entertainment for those

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<sup>3</sup> There is one notable exception. Before November 28, 1950, the town of Ellenton was known for the "Ellenton riots" of 1876, which resulted from the killing of an African American who attempted to rob Mrs. Alonzo Harley's home on September 19. Fearing for the life of a second African American man involved with the robbery, a crowd of armed African American men gathered to ensure his safety. A mob of white men from nearby communities confronted this African American militia. Between six and seven hundred men were arrested for murder and attempted murder, but none were tried.

who sought more modern amenities than those offered in Ellenton. Ellentonians enjoyed a peaceful and unencumbered lifestyle until the town's death.

The fate of Ellenton was sealed on November 28, 1950. The United States announced that it would need to relocate 7,000 citizens across a 250,000 acre tract of land near the Savannah River in order to construct a nuclear facility to produce tritium vital to the production of thermonuclear weapons. The evacuation of the area would lead to the destruction of Ellenton and the neighboring towns of Dunbarton, Meyers Mill, Hawthorne, Leigh, and Robbins. Of these towns, Ellenton was the largest with nearly a tenth of the total population to be displaced. The town of Dunbarton was the second largest in the community with a population of 300.<sup>4</sup> The majority of those who were displaced lived in the vast areas outside of these towns, but many considered themselves residents of these nearby towns and often conducted business in Ellenton and Dunbarton.

The acquisition of Ellenton by the federal government destroyed the tranquility which had defined the community. In their final months in the town, the residents of Ellenton were forced to deal with nosy outsiders, slow home appraisals, and the heartbreak which accompanied the destruction of their home. And yet, despite these problems, the majority of the area's citizens displayed a sense of understanding and peaceful acceptance of their fate. While the sacrifice asked of the residents of Ellenton is symbolic of the sense of urgency with which the United States plunged deeper into the

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<sup>4</sup> Tonya Algerine Browder, Richard David Brooks and David Colin Crass, *Memories of Home: Dunbarton and Meyers Mill Remembered*, Savannah River Archaeological Research Heritage Series 1, Occasional Papers of the Savannah River Archeological Program Community History Project (Columbia: Savannah River Archaeological Research Program, South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of South Carolina, 1993), 10.

nuclear arms race, the reaction of Ellentonians is symbolic of the major changes taking place in the South in the years after World War II.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE H-BOMB'S FIRST VICTIMS

In much the same way as the decade that preceded it, the 1950s arrived under a cloud of uncertainty and instability. The peace that should have accompanied the end of the Second World War was nullified by escalating tension between the United States and the Soviet Union. Mainland China had fallen to the communists in 1949, just months before the United States relinquished its stranglehold on atomic weaponry.

While relations between the United States and the Soviet Union were significantly strained in the years following World War II, the American monopoly on atomic weapons created a balance that offset the Soviet advantage in manpower and preserved relative peace. It was widely believed that it would take the Soviets six to eight years to develop an atomic bomb, providing a war-weary United States with much needed breathing room and a significant head start in nuclear development.<sup>5</sup> The atomic bomb served as the United States' ace in the hole and provided a sense of security for military leaders and the general public alike.

The American monopoly on nuclear weaponry was not to last, however. In September of 1949, an Air Force weather plane noticed extraordinary signs of radiation while traveling over the Pacific Ocean. The source of the radiation was quickly discovered: the Soviet Union had successfully tested its first atomic weapon on August 29.

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<sup>5</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), 35.

The news came as a major shock to the Truman administration. David McCullough wrote, “Though there was no panic in the country, the fears and tensions of the Cold War were greatly amplified. It was a different world now.”<sup>6</sup> President Harry Truman and his advisors were forced to reevaluate American military preparedness. In analyzing various options for addressing the loss of an American nuclear monopoly, the discussion quickly turned to strengthening conventional forces and increasing the production of atomic bombs. While these were the most practical options for dealing with the new Soviet nuclear threat, a third option was placed on the table: production of a hydrogen bomb.<sup>7</sup>

The Truman administration was left with a difficult decision. Faced with a growing crisis in the global community, the president was asked to make a decision regarding a theoretical weapon whose existence had been unknown to him before the Soviet nuclear test.<sup>8</sup> While the United States retained a clear lead in the arms race, the Soviet bomb had undoubtedly shaken the balance of power between the two nations. Perhaps more importantly, the production of an atomic weapon by the Soviet Union affected the national and global perceptions of the balance between the two superpowers. Melvyn Leffler stated,

World order, and with it American security, had come to depend as much on *perceptions* of the balance of power as on what that balance actually was. And the perceptions involved were not just those of statesmen customarily charged with making policy; they also reflected mass opinion, foreign as well as domestic, informed as well as uninformed, rational as well as irrational. Before such an

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<sup>6</sup> David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 749.

<sup>7</sup> Gaddis, *The Cold War*, 36.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Rhodes, *Dark Sun: The Making of the Hydrogen Bomb* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1996), 381.

audience even the appearance of a shift in power relationships could have unnerving consequences.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, perceptions of the balance of power between the Soviet Union and the United States would play a major role in the American reaction to the Soviet bomb.

While upgrading conventional forces and building more atomic weapons would strengthen the United States, they could only do so much in shifting the perceptions of the balance of power. The hydrogen bomb, however, could effectively reestablish the previous balance between the Soviet Union and the United States.<sup>10</sup> The new weapon would serve as a strong signal that the United States would not allow the Soviet Union to encroach on the American lead in atomic weaponry.

There was another element which accompanied discussion of the hydrogen bomb: if the Soviets had developed an atomic weapon faster than predicted, how long would it be before they developed a hydrogen bomb? The Soviet development of an atomic weapon had shaken the balance of power; Soviet development of a hydrogen bomb would destroy that balance altogether.<sup>11</sup> Melvyn Leffler observed, “Possession of such a bomb by the United States would instantly restore its superiority. On the other hand, if the Soviets developed it, the global balance of power would be transformed.”<sup>12</sup> “If the Soviets alone had the hydrogen bomb,” Leffler continued, “the psychological fallout in peacetime would be enormous.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 90.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 80.

<sup>11</sup> The Soviet Union had been pursuing a hydrogen bomb since 1946, and had a basic concept for such a device before it had successfully tested a traditional atomic weapon. For more, see David Holloway, *Stalin and the Bomb* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 295-299.

<sup>12</sup> Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 327-328.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 328.

News of the Soviet attainment of atomic weapons capabilities demanded attention from the Truman administration, but it was far from the only issue troubling the president at the dawn of the 1950s. The fall of China in 1949 had sent a shockwave through the West as nearly a fifth of the world's population turned to communism overnight. In January 1950, Klaus Fuchs, a major player in the development of the atomic bomb, admitted to being a spy for the Soviet Union. The news of Fuchs's involvement with the Soviets came on the heels of the conviction of Alger Hiss on January 21. A former State Department official, Hiss was found guilty of perjury stemming from his passing of classified documents to the Soviets. This onslaught of bad news created uncertainty which heightened the sense of urgency surrounding the decision to pursue a hydrogen bomb.<sup>14</sup>

Republicans quickly took advantage of this uncertainty, with Richard Nixon and Joseph McCarthy leading the attacks against the Truman administration. Nixon, who as part of the House Un-American Activities Committee had led the prosecution against Hiss, accused the Truman administration of knowingly covering up Hiss's actions.<sup>15</sup> On February 9, 1950, McCarthy, then an unknown first-term Senator from Wisconsin, announced during a speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, that he had a list of 205 "known Communists" who had infiltrated the State Department. Although his accusations were unsubstantiated (he had no such list), McCarthy quickly rose to national attention. Truman and his staff faced serious political pressure that recent news made difficult to cast aside.

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<sup>14</sup> McCullough, *Truman*, 764.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 759.



While President Truman dealt with these problems, the recently formed National Security Council addressed the growing concerns in the global community and charted a course for American action. Paper No. 68 of the National Security Council, better known as NSC-68, was released in early April. NSC-68 addressed the massive military spending of the Soviet Union and suggested a similar response from the United States.<sup>16</sup> The document proposed a massive buildup of the military, nearly tripling the defense budget. With “an apocalyptic theme,” NSC-68 declared that this buildup was essential to securing the United States and the Western world.<sup>17</sup>

Facing political pressure and a growing Soviet threat, President Truman, on January 31, 1950, authorized development of a hydrogen bomb. The President defended the decision by arguing that it was not a decision at all as there were no feasible alternatives.<sup>18</sup> Development of a hydrogen bomb was seen as essential to reestablishing the United States’ fragile balance with the Soviet Union.

As soon as President Truman made his decision to pursue a hydrogen bomb, analysts began to evaluate the steps that would need to be taken to construct such a device. The production of the hydrogen bomb would require substantial amounts of tritium. While American nuclear reactors at the time would have been able to produce tritium, it would have prevented those facilities from producing plutonium for conventional atomic weapons. It was quickly determined that a new facility would need

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<sup>16</sup> Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power*, 356.

<sup>17</sup> McCullough, *Truman*, 772.

<sup>18</sup> Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 80.

to be built, focusing solely on the production of tritium. Wrote Richard Rhodes, “Unless it built a new generation of reactors . . . the US would have to forego eighty to one hundred kilograms of plutonium – enough for thirty to forty composite-core atomic bombs – for every kilogram of tritium it produced.”<sup>19</sup>

The Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) contracted the DuPont Company to manage the plant’s construction and operation. This firm had previously constructed the nuclear facility at Hanford, Washington, which had played a crucial role in the development of the first atomic bomb during World War II. DuPont’s success at Hanford made it a logical choice for overseeing the construction of the new facility. Together, the AEC and DuPont began to scan the country for possible sites to house the new complex.

The American South, once dominated by agricultural interests, experienced rapid industrialization during World War II. Indeed, industry essential to the war effort helped shape a new path for the South and began the long road to industrializing the region. Dewey W. Grantham observes, “Southern congressional leaders, through their support of Roosevelt’s defense and international policies, assumed a progressive role in the war effort and encouraged the more complete integration of the South into the Union.”<sup>20</sup> While the South would retain a number of its cultural and social peculiarities, the region would be unquestionably altered by the arrival of industry.

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<sup>19</sup> Rhodes, *Dark Sun*, 380.

<sup>20</sup> Dewey W. Grantham, “The South and Congressional Politics,” *Remaking Dixie: The Impact of World War II on the American South* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1997), 31.

In the postwar years, Southern leaders sought industry to prevent the region from returning to prewar economic conditions. James C. Cobb writes, “The Great Depression had been especially damaging to the industry-seeking efforts, but World War II resurrected the South’s economy and encouraged its leaders to take whatever action was necessary to keep their states from slipping back into the desperate poverty of the thirties.” “In the postwar period,” Cobb continues, “economic progress became a regional obsession as every southern state expanded and intensified industrial development activities that increasingly absorbed the resources of state and local governments and the energies of public officials and private citizens as well.”<sup>21</sup> This increased industrialization had a major impact on the region as poor farmers and sharecroppers abandoned the land for jobs in textile mills and factories.

Like many rural towns in the South, Ellenton, South Carolina, had experienced a declining population as farmers and sharecroppers left the land. Louise Cassels noticed the changes taking place in her community, writing, “Even though industry was slowly moving in, it wasn’t sufficient to give the impetus needed for the progress the people longed for. Now, after all these years,” she continued, “Ellenton was fast becoming a nonagenarian; the population had barely reached a thousand.”<sup>22</sup> The industry that offered farmers an alternative to working the land had decimated small town communities, which, ironically, looked to industrial interests as a way to bolster their lagging economies. Pete Daniel concluded, “As southerners left rural areas, small-town

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<sup>21</sup> James C. Cobb, *The Selling of the South* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 1.

<sup>22</sup> Louise Cassels, *The Unexpected Exodus* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2007), 3.

businesses went broke, church congregations dwindled, and community vitality flickered and sometimes died.”<sup>23</sup>

Politicians in the Central Savannah River Area (CSRA) actively pursued industrial interests and federal projects that could revive the region’s economy. Edgar Brown, a state Senator from Barnwell, SC, and Lester Moody, secretary for the Chamber of Commerce in nearby Augusta, Georgia, had secured the Clarks Hill Dam project which was nearing completion in the fall of 1950. When contacted about the possibility of housing the new nuclear facility in the region, Brown and Moody actively pursued the project realizing the enormous economic impact that would accompany the plant’s arrival.<sup>24</sup> “Federal dollars became the means by which the South acquired development capital and ceased being an economic colony of the North,” Kari Frederickson writes. “Winning federal contracts and installations, as well as attracting industry in general, was a broad-based project in which local and state political leaders, industrial development companies, chambers of commerce, and newspapers cooperated in ‘selling the South.’”<sup>25</sup> South Carolina representatives were able to recycle previous tactics designed to attract more traditional industrial interests. One historian writes, “DuPont had already accumulated information on the Ellenton area during the site selection process for their Orlon factory. The state’s Research, Planning, and Development Board had prepared

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<sup>23</sup> Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 9.

<sup>24</sup> Mary Beth Reed and others, *Savannah River Site at Fifty*, edited by Barbara Smith Strack (Washington, D.C.: Department of Energy; Stone Mountain, Ga.: The New South and Associates, 2002), 136.

<sup>25</sup> Kari Frederickson, “Confronting the Garrison State,” *Journal of Southern History* Vol. 72, No. 2 (2006), 353.

brochures and summary data describing the Ellenton vicinity as a candidate site for an industrial plant.”<sup>26</sup>

Given the major criteria involved in site selection, the South served as a natural region for housing the nuclear facility. Du Pont’s official history of the plant cites four major criteria for choosing the location of the new plant:

- A very large and dependable flow of water – of satisfactory purity – to remove the great quantities of heat that would be generated in the reactors, and to supply the water from which heavy water would be extracted
- A large land area with terrain, geology and a climate that were conducive to fast construction
- An area from which it would be necessary to remove only a comparatively small number of inhabitants; which was somewhat isolated, yet near cities and towns that could accommodate construction and operations personnel
- Good transportation.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to those criteria, DuPont decided to make a major change from previous facilities. Unlike the previous nuclear facilities at Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and Hanford, Washington, DuPont sought to construct the project without providing a company town. Arthur Tackman, assistant to Curtis A. Nelson, the AEC project manager, stated, “Americans just don’t like living in government towns. It makes them feel as though

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<sup>26</sup> Reed, *Savannah River Site at Fifty*, 137.

<sup>27</sup> W.P. Bebbington, *History of Du Pont at the Savannah River Plant* (Wilmington: E.I. DuPont de Nemours and Company, 1990), 12, 13.

they were being deprived of some of their independence.”<sup>28</sup> The stipulation would require adequate room in surrounding communities for housing the construction workers and officials needed to operate the plant. Reed notes, “The defense considerations and the housing requirement made the South a leading candidate for the complex.”<sup>29</sup> A number of communities across the South would have met the requirements, but the Ellenton, South Carolina, area that would eventually be selected to house the tritium-producing nuclear facility proved nearly ideal as it fully satisfied every criterion.

By 1950 the town of Ellenton was experiencing a lagging economy not uncommon among small agrarian communities. Farmers and sharecroppers left the land as industrial enterprises in nearby cities provided an alternative to the backbreaking labor in the fields. The population of Ellenton in 1950 stood at just 739 residents, with 135 families owning homes in the town.<sup>30</sup> With such a low population and farmers rapidly leaving the community, the town of Ellenton was on economic life-support.

While residents would later lament that they did not understand why Ellenton was chosen, the town was exceptionally well-suited to meet the criteria laid out by Du Pont. The dam under construction at Clarks Hill would ensure the dependable water supply necessary for cooling the reactors, while the land in the chosen site proved to be sufficiently underdeveloped as to allow for quick construction. Likewise, the relative isolation of the affected land ensured a minimal amount of residents would have to be

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<sup>28</sup> Daniel Lang, “Camellias and H-Bombs,” *The New Yorker*, July 7, 1951, 43.

<sup>29</sup> Reed, *Savannah River Site at Fifty*, 118.

<sup>30</sup> Browder, *Memories of Home: Ellenton*, ix.

removed. In addition to the town's proximity to Augusta and Aiken potentially satisfying the housing and economic needs of immigrating plant workers, the railroad which led into Ellenton further facilitated timely construction at the plant. Given the criteria offered by Du Pont, Ellenton could not have been a more ideal setting for the plant.

Residents of the area would no doubt argue with this assessment of their community. While the town was in many ways isolated, some residents seemed to believe that the relatively close proximity to Augusta, which with a population of 70,000 ironically served to satisfy one of the other criteria by providing a source of labor and housing, proved that the town was not as isolated as it appeared. A number of Ellentonians later lamented the loss of the open lands around the town, citing the many recreational endeavors which were available to the townspeople, in particular the Three Runs Creek area. While Du Pont and the AEC may have viewed the open spaces as proof of the town's isolation and ability to facilitate construction, the residents of Ellenton regarded the land as one of the major advantages of life in that community.

Nevertheless, the area had participated in the same courting of industry as other regions throughout the South. While they may have been unprepared for the sweeping changes that their enticement of industry would bring, they had welcomed the thought of industry and longed for a project to stimulate their community. By the summer of 1950, Ellenton was in an all too common situation in the South, experiencing economic stagnation and longing for industrial growth.

The pursuit of a hydrogen bomb became increasingly urgent in the summer of 1950. In the early hours of June 25, 1950, North Korean forces crossed the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel into the Republic of South Korea. The invasion came as a complete shock to the Western world and made the American development of a hydrogen bomb that much more important. As shocking and disheartening as the escalation of hostilities in Korea was, the situation would get much worse.

The United States entered the war in Korea in early July. Following a number of early defeats, the United States, as part of a coalition of UN forces, was able to push the North Korean army back across the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. As the UN forces pushed further north past the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, they were met by Chinese forces pushing south. With China's involvement in the conflict in Korea, the conflict seemed to be pushing closer to a full-blown confrontation between the Communist superpowers and the Western world. Truman had feared that the outbreak of hostilities in Korea would lead to World War III.<sup>31</sup> With Chinese involvement in Korea, Truman's fears began to appear incredibly prescient.

The escalation of the conflict in Korea only furthered the status of the new nuclear facility as being of the utmost importance. In November 1950, AEC and DuPont officials selected areas of Aiken, Allendale, and Barnwell counties as the site for what would be called the Savannah River Plant.<sup>32</sup> Although the area selected was not highly populated, the communities of Ellenton, Dunbarton, and Meyers Mill would have to be removed entirely. Despite these concerns, the hydrogen bomb project had finally found a home.

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<sup>31</sup> McCullough, *Truman*, 775.

<sup>32</sup> Reed, *Savannah River Site at Fifty*, 132.



## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **“A BIG BALL OF THUNDER OUT OF A CLEAR BLUE SKY”**

News of the coming Savannah River Plant spread like wildfire in the afternoon hours of November 28, 1950. Politicians across the state rejoiced upon hearing that a project of vital importance to national security would soon begin construction in South Carolina. Leaders in nearby Augusta, Georgia, and Aiken, South Carolina, celebrated the news in hopes that the plant could provide economic salvation for the area. While these politicians and leaders celebrated, the residents of Ellenton, Dunbarton, Meyers Mill, and the other condemned areas attempted to come to grips with the fact that their homes would be sacrificed. The shocking announcement of the plant left many speechless and unable to fathom the changes in store for the area.

And yet, despite the major changes the plant would bring, a number of residents in Ellenton showed a willingness to cooperate that exposes major changes that were already underway in the American South. By 1950, Southerners began to recognize greater national concerns as their own and viewed Soviet aggression as an immediate threat to their way of life. The South still had major problems that separated the region from the rest of the United States, but Southerners identified American threats as their own and showed that they were willing to contribute to the defense of the nation from Soviet aggression. While they were devastated that their communities would have to be evacuated, the citizens of Ellenton declared that they were willing to do their part for the defense of their country.

Writes one historian of the Savannah River Plant, “Reaction to the public announcement of the site selection was jubilant in Georgia and South Carolina.”<sup>33</sup> While this may not have been the case for the residents of Ellenton, this is certainly true for the politicians who had courted the plant. Edgar Brown and Lester Moody, local politicians who had played vital roles in securing the Clarks Hill Dam, proved instrumental in bringing the plant to South Carolina. As secretary of the Chamber of Commerce for nearby Augusta, Georgia, Moody championed the coming plant as an economic miracle. “The coming of this one government plant will equal the simultaneous installation of fifty small factories in Augusta,” he told *The Augusta Chronicle*. “This development will revolutionize the Savannah River basin. It will make Augusta a minor metropolis.”<sup>34</sup> Moody was not alone in his belief that the Savannah River Plant could revitalize the local communities; in a joint statement with Representative Solomon Blatt, Edgar Brown stated, “Whatever our government needs, we are for . . . This means an almost complete change-over from our slow agricultural life. We must adjust ourselves to the change. In the end, we believe Barnwell County will be greater, bigger, better and richer.”<sup>35</sup>

A number of South Carolina political leaders exhibited a sense of pride and excitement following the announcement of the plant. James F. Byrnes, governor-elect at the time of the announcement, remarked, “Since the United States has determined that this is the best location, I feel sure our people will patriotically and cheerfully adjust themselves.” Governor Strom Thurmond shared similar sentiments, saying, “I am glad

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<sup>33</sup> Reed, *Savannah River Site at Fifty*, 151.

<sup>34</sup> Ira Henry Freeman, “Atomic neighbors foresee rich era,” *New York Times*, December 10, 1950, 88.

<sup>35</sup> “Patriotic feeling flavored reaction to announcement,” *Augusta Chronicle*, November 29, 1970.

that South Carolina and her people can have a part in helping this nation maintain a free world.” John J. Riley, a U.S. congressman from Sumter, carried this sense of pride and patriotic sacrifice to an absurd level, making an obvious push for public support by equating the troubles of the Cold War era to the unrest of the Civil War. “Not since Sherman marched through South Carolina have our people faced the problems they face today,” Riley stated. “Our people, feeling a high sense of patriotic duty, have accepted the move as their contribution to defense,” Riley continued, “We are proud of them – and we are proud that South Carolina has been selected for this great plant.” U.S. Senator Olin D. Johnston of South Carolina praised the area selected for the site and promised full cooperation from the local residents. “This is a very wise selection in an area with the finest and most cooperative people in the world,” Johnson said. “The location... will mean that my people in South Carolina will have an opportunity to contribute even more to the defense of the nation, and I am sure that South Carolinians will cherish this opportunity.”<sup>36</sup> The political leaders of the state recognized that sacrifices would have to be made, but they ultimately applauded the announcement of the Savannah River Site and welcomed the facility as an economic savior for the region.

Much like the politicians of South Carolina, the *Augusta Chronicle's* announcement of the Savannah River Plant was extraordinarily optimistic in its assessment of what the plant could bring to the city: “A swelling population, an upsurge in business of all types, an increase in land and property values – those are only a few of the advantages the average Augustan sees in the decision of the Atomic Energy

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

Commission to construct a new production plant in this area.”<sup>37</sup> Both Aiken, South Carolina, and Augusta, Georgia, realized the great economic potential the plant could bring to the region and welcomed the plant with open arms.

While politicians and neighboring towns celebrated the plant, for residents of Ellenton and the other areas to be evacuated the news came as a crushing blow. For the older families in Ellenton, the announcement of the Savannah River Plant shattered a community in which they had invested their entire lives. The evacuation of the area would force farmers from their land and, in many cases, from the profession itself. Although many citizens noted that they were ready and willing to do whatever was required of them, the evacuation of Ellenton was heartbreaking and traumatic for many.

The news that Ellenton, Dunbarton, Meyers Mill, and the surrounding areas would have to be evacuated shocked residents, but there were signs in the weeks before the announcement was made that a major change was in store for the area. While it would have taken extraordinary clairvoyance to predict Ellenton’s demise, an article in the *Augusta Chronicle* on September 14, 1950, stated that the South was being “scanned for possible erection of a 200,000-acre development for the production of a vital hydrogen bomb ingredient.”<sup>38</sup> The article discussed details of the coming plant, stating that the proposed plant would produce tritium and would require a great deal of land. In addition to announcing the government’s intent to build such a plant, the article also noted the many benefits that the plant would bring. “If constructed in the South, the giant

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<sup>37</sup> “Plant means big boom for Augusta,” *Augusta Chronicle*, November 29, 1950, 1.

<sup>38</sup> “South being scanned as site for H-bomb ingredient plant,” *Augusta Chronicle*, September 4, 1950, 1D.

plant would prove a boom to a large surrounding area,” the reporter wrote. “In addition to providing employment for many skilled workers, it would stand as the most important scientific development in the South in many years.”<sup>39</sup> The only thing the article neglected to mention was the thousands who would be forced to move if the plant were to come to the area.

Although few could have predicted the true nature of these rumors of coming change, a number of residents in the affected areas began to notice signs of something big on the horizon. Ellentonians recalled that outsiders had been visiting the area and conducting various tests on the environment, including taking soil and water samples. Stephen Harley first heard the news of big change in store for Ellenton through his friend Jack Harden, son of Herbert Harden, the town’s station agent for the Charleston and Western Carolina Railway. Harley said that Jack had relayed to him that his father was receiving “some strange telegrams that he doesn’t understand,” noting that they mentioned a “big plant” to make “tanks or some kind of bullets or some kind of ammunition.”<sup>40</sup> Harley also recalls a visit from government officials in the months before the announcement was made. “They came to our door and told us ‘We’re going to dig a hole on your land to test the soil.’ They didn’t offer to pay us or compensate us; they just told us they were doing it.”<sup>41</sup> A number of former residents experienced similar run-ins with government officials. “The people noticed strangers digging holes in the area, taking water and soil samples,” Shirley Dicks Powers remembered. “There were

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Browder, *Memories of Home: Ellenton*, 164.

<sup>41</sup> Stephen Harley, interview.

many ideas and rumors as to what was happening. Some were excited over the fact that they might be looking for oil, uranium or some other valuable substance.”<sup>42</sup> Some citizens also recalled an increase in helicopter and airplane activity over the town and the surrounding areas.<sup>43</sup> While no one could have predicted the fate of Ellenton and neighboring communities, there were undeniable warning signs that major change was on the horizon.

As alarming and rumor-inducing as it was to have government agents testing the soil and water in the Ellenton area, a far more ominous outside presence appeared in town in the weeks before the big announcement. While Ellentonians dreamed of riches and economic growth, those with privileged information attempted to line their own pockets by taking advantage of the situation. Buck and Imogen Thames Schumpert recalled,

We were living in Ellenton, with my mother [when the announcement was made]. The funny part about it is that not long before we got the news that we were going to move, we had this man coming around trying to buy up all the frontage property. His name was Ellie [E.J.] Hay and he was a surveyor from down around the springs – Boiling Springs. He came around trying to buy up properties that had frontage, you know, that were on the highways, ‘cause it was more valuable. I remember him wanting to buy my Mama’s property and then, it wasn’t but a couple months later that they announced the properties were going to be taken by the government. So, somewhere, somehow, a leakage had gotten out.<sup>44</sup>

E. J. Hay was not the last to attempt to turn a profit from the demise of Ellenton. Those with dollar signs in their eyes would try to exploit the situation in Ellenton throughout the last year and a half of the town’s existence.

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<sup>42</sup> Browder, *Memories of Home: Dunbarton and Meyers Mill*, 155.

<sup>43</sup> Stephen Harley, interview.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

In her memoir, Louise Cassels, a teacher at the Ellenton School, noted that the town had been filled with “an air of excitement.” Cassels was brutally honest in her assessment of Ellenton, noting that the area had suffered from a “stunted growth” and a “lagging economy.” With such few means of economic growth and a dwindling population, residents welcomed the idea of industrial progress in their small town. However, this hope for industrial salvation stemmed from the fact that the residents of Ellenton wished to *remain* in Ellenton and see their town blossom. Cassels described residents as “excited and impatient children waiting for Santa on Christmas Eve.”<sup>45</sup>

Daniel Lang writes,

For several weeks before the announcement, they had watched engineers set up drill rigs at various points to plumb the soil. They had no idea what was going on, and invented a variety of rumors: The engineers had been assigned to find a site for a glue factory, a cotton-goods factory, an aluminum plant; they were prospecting for oil, uranium, kaolin.<sup>46</sup>

Given the intense anticipation of the residents of Ellenton and surrounding towns, their somber reaction to the news of their displacement in the wake of the Savannah River Plant should come as no surprise.

It is important to understand the sense of excitement that had gripped the town of Ellenton in the months prior to the announcement to understand how disheartening the news was. With the Tennessee Valley Authority and other New Deal programs of the 1930s, the South had seen numerous industrial advancements and economic gains. The nearly completed Clarks Hill Project signaled progress for the region and helped secure the plant’s location. The Leigh Banana Case Company, the lone industrial enterprise in

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<sup>45</sup> Cassels, *The Unexpected Exodus*, 3.

<sup>46</sup> Lang, “Camellias and H-Bombs,” 48.

the areas to be evacuated, was often mentioned for its importance to the community.

While the area had certainly not been engulfed in industrial progress, the townspeople themselves were not opposed to the idea of industrialization. The announcement that the residents of Ellenton would be forced to leave their homes and the communities in which they had lived their entire lives was devastating; that this news came on the heels of weeks of enthusiastic rumors of economic salvation merely added insult to injury.

Despite the early warning signs of major change on the horizon, the immediate reaction amongst the residents of Ellenton and the area to the news that they would have to evacuate was decidedly and understandably grim. Mike Cassels told Ira Henry Freeman of the *New York Times* that those in the area “felt just like they had a death in the family.”<sup>47</sup> He shared similar feelings with *Time* magazine, stating, “It's like having a death in the family, going to the funeral, then returning home and realizing the emptiness of the house.”<sup>48</sup> For many in Ellenton, the news of the town's demise could only be compared to an unexpected death in the family.

Louise Cassels first heard the word from one of her children who had been granted permission to eat lunch at his home just across the street from the school. Cassels recalled being stunned by the news that put an obvious damper on the remainder of the school day.<sup>49</sup> In the teachers' lounge after school had ended, Cassels encountered a fellow teacher who had become physically ill at hearing the report.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Freeman, “Atomic neighbors foresee rich era,” 88.

<sup>48</sup> “The Displaced,” *Time*, December 12, 1950.

<sup>49</sup> Cassels, *The Unexpected Exodus*, 11.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 13.



Louise Cassels's brother Mike had been one of the first residents of Ellenton to hear the news. Along with other town leaders, Mike Cassels was informed of the decision about an hour before the official announcement was made by the DuPont Company and the Atomic Energy Commission. Louise noted that the child who initially broke the news had remarked that he had heard Mike on the radio, quoting the child as saying, "He said we hated to give up our town, but we would, if it's necessary to save our country."<sup>51</sup> Mike Cassels attempted to spread this sentiment across the community and worked to ensure a peaceful reaction from his neighbors.

H. W. Risher, mayor of Ellenton, acknowledged the crushing blow that the announcement brought in light of recent excitement and optimism in the town. Like many, Risher thought that the government was about to bring a major change to the area. "It made a big boom alright," he told the *New York Times*.<sup>52</sup> "We aren't going to like it much to have to move out," Risher said, "but I guess we don't have much choice."<sup>53</sup> Mayor Risher's wife expressed a similar resignation to fate in response to the news. "When we were told that we'd have to leave," Mrs. Risher said, "we all thought about protesting, but we were told there was nothing much to do about it."<sup>54</sup>

Many of the residents in the affected areas were crushed by the report of the coming plant. While a number of Ellentonians exhibited a patriotic sense of sacrifice in their reactions, nearly all of them described the thought that their town would have to be evacuated as heartbreaking and completely unexpected. Mary Irene Strom Hiers from

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>52</sup> Ira Henry Freeman, "Atomic plant area grieves at exodus," *New York Times*, December 9, 1950, 17.

<sup>53</sup> "Patriotic feeling flavored reaction to announcement," *Augusta Chronicle*, November 29, 1970.

<sup>54</sup> "SRP begins new decade this week," *Augusta Chronicle*, November 27, 1960.

Dunbarton recounted that the announcement “came much like a big ball of thunder out a clear blue sky. Yet, it was, without a doubt, a reality.”<sup>55</sup> Dr. Fred C. Brinkley, who practiced medicine in Ellenton and served as one of the town’s elder statesman, responded in much the same fashion as Mike Cassels and mayor Risher, saying, “It is rather crushing to have to give up your home, the land you love and most of all your friends. But if it is best for my country and knowing that others are sacrificing so much more then I’m willing to give it up.”<sup>56</sup> Arthur A. Foreman told a local journalist, “I’m stunned. It’s too big to take in.” The reporter noted that Foreman regretted that “lifelong ties of the best friends in the world, the best community in the world and the home that has sheltered me all of my life must be sacrificed.”<sup>57</sup> Basil Turner Brinkley, Sr., postmaster in Ellenton, responded to the news by saying, “The magnitude of this thing has stunned me. I have labored all my life for my home and hate to give it up but if it is for my country, then I am willing to do it.”<sup>58</sup> Mary Dorry, a waitress, moved to Ellenton from Oak Ridge, Tennessee, to escape the uneasiness she felt in living so close to a nuclear facility. Dorry was devastated by the news of the Savannah River Plant, telling a local paper, “It looks like you can’t go anywhere any more.”<sup>59</sup>

As could be expected within any community, there were a number of different reactions to reports that Ellenton would have to be evacuated. Families that had recently moved to Ellenton and its neighboring towns often responded less vehemently to the

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<sup>55</sup> Browder, *Memories of Home: Dunbarton and Meyers Mill Remembered*, 157.

<sup>56</sup> Ray Shockley, “Ellenton’s residents stunned, but accept news patriotically,” *Augusta Chronicle*, November 29, 1950, 1.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ray Shockley, “Strange calm settles over four towns to be moved for H-bomb installation,” *Augusta Chronicle*, December 1, 1950, 10.

<sup>59</sup> “Just can’t escape, moans Ellentonian,” *Augusta Chronicle*, November 29, 1950, 3.

forced exodus than those whose families had deeper ties to the community. Indeed, there were a number of larger families in Ellenton, Dunbarton, and Meyers Mills whose entire family structure was threatened by the move. Interviewed in 1993, Gene Roundtree remembered,

It was a close knit community. They (the government) told us, 'Hey, your family is going to be split. You can't live together no more.' It was real trauma. It's different when you move away, you can come back home anytime. This is different. The roots were pulled up. The tap root is gone. There is nothing to go back to. The fear of, what am I going to do? I have farmed all my life. Who can I trust? Where can I go? This is what people were asking themselves and there were no answers.<sup>60</sup>

Roundtree's sentiments were not uncommon. Some of Ellenton's oldest families were forced from land they had owned for generations. Mrs. Mary Dicks Bush told the *New York Times*, "I'm so hurt I don't know what to say." "I've lived here all my life," she continued. "My family settled here in the early Seventeen Hundreds. Why, Ellenton was named for my husband's Aunt Ellen Dunbar one hundred years ago."<sup>61</sup>

In addition to breaking up larger families and forcing residents from long-held properties, the evacuation of Ellenton and surrounding areas also separated friends and neighbors. In response to the widespread fear of community dissolution, Louise Cassels said that she hoped the residents of Ellenton "can all move somewhere together."<sup>62</sup> While many in the town shared this sentiment, financial hurdles and logistical obstacles would force residents of Ellenton and Dunbarton to spread across a wide range of cities and states.

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<sup>60</sup> Browder, *Memories of Home: Dunbarton and Meyers Mill Remembered*, 161.

<sup>61</sup> Freeman, "Atomic plant area grieves at exodus," 17.

<sup>62</sup> Shockley, "Ellenton's residents stunned, but accept news patriotically," 1.

For local farmers, the announcement that they would have to relinquish their land to the government threatened their entire way of life. C.S. Anderson, a farmer from Dunbarton, noted in his diary on November 28, 1950: "Have been in Dunbarton ever Since the Railroad was built dont think I have ever seen people So torn up as it has been here this afternoon when it was announced that the Government was taking all lands and everything else."<sup>63</sup> Hal Bruford marched into the Long Store in Ellenton and declared, "I just sold all my cows, a hundred and fifty head. Then you know one thing? I sat down in the house and cried." F. Hamilton Dicks, mayor of nearby Dunbarton, told Ira Henry Freeman, "My colored boys and I were just starting to put in winter rye oats. When we heard the news we drove the tractors right back into the shed. What was the use of going on until we knew whether we could make a '51-crop?"<sup>64</sup> Facing uncertain futures, farmers in the area were hesitant to continue their work without reassurance that their work would not be in vain.

A number of farmers in the area seemed at a loss for words and were unable to grasp the full nature of the decision to evacuate the area. William Bonner responded to the news by telling a local reporter, "I don't understand really what it means, but I don't think much of it."<sup>65</sup> C.H. Dicks, who owned a 2,000 acre farm near Dunbarton, echoed this sense of disbelief and bewilderment, saying "The impact of this thing is so great that I am not large enough to visualize anything of this nature."<sup>66</sup> Willie Cummings, a local farmer who grew cotton in the first area to be evacuated, experienced a similar feeling of

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<sup>63</sup> Browder, *Memories of Home: Dunbarton and Meyers Mill*, 155.

<sup>64</sup> Freeman, "Atomic plant area grieves at exodus," 17.

<sup>65</sup> Shockley, "Ellenton's residents stunned, but accept news patriotically," 1, 2.

<sup>66</sup> Shockley, "Strange calm settles over four towns to be moved for H-bomb installation," 10.

uncertainty saying, “I don’t rightly know where we are going or if we are going to make crop this year or who is going to move us or what. We are all mixed up.”<sup>67</sup> For local farmers, the news that they would have to hand over their property posed immediate problems.

Identifying possible economic hardships that may accompany the evacuation of the area, residents of Ellenton and Dunbarton voiced immediate concerns as to the future of their various financial enterprises. As the largest industry in the area, the Leigh Banana Case Company provided work for almost 400 residents in nearby towns. H.J. Linder, vice president of the company, responded, “It’s the biggest thing that ever hit this part of the country.”<sup>68</sup> A few days after the announcement was made, Linder stated that his work force was “demoralized.” He continued, “We may move to our Savannah plant and try to take our 350 employees with us.”<sup>69</sup> Mike Cassels expressed concern with the fate of impoverished residents in the area. “If those fellows working a sawmill don’t get paid on Saturday they don’t eat,” Cassels told a reporter. “If a cropper can’t get store credit until he gets his share of the crop money how’s he going to live? We’ve got to raise an emergency fund especially for colored people until they get relocated.”<sup>70</sup> For the Ellentonians, the announcement of the plant cast every aspect of their lives into uncertainty.

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<sup>67</sup> Freeman, “Atomic plant area grieves at exodus,” 17.

<sup>68</sup> Shockley, “Ellenton’ residents stunned, but accept news patriotically,” 1.

<sup>69</sup> Freeman, “Atomic plant area grieves at exodus,” 17.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

Less than two weeks after the announcement, Mike Cassels told a reporter, “I’m glad there’s been very little bitterness towards the Government expressed.” Echoing his earlier sentiments, Cassels continued, “I don’t know what we’ve got that our country needs – some say there’s a mysterious element in the soil – but whatever it is we’ll gladly give it regardless of sacrifice.”<sup>71</sup> Most Ellentonians shared the same sentiments as Cassels – at least in public. The majority of residents quoted in the major papers reporting on the announcement echoed similar feelings, often lamenting the loss of their town while simultaneously putting on a patriotic face in declaring that they would gladly sacrifice anything that the government asks of them.

While information on the exact nature of the plant was scarce, residents of the area affected by the coming plant were told that the facility would be vital to national security. With the Soviet Union’s production of their own atomic weapon the previous year, the continued war against the spread of Communism in Korea, and an attempt on President Truman’s life less than a month earlier, town leaders seemed eager to show the patriotism of the residents of Ellenton. A number of the community’s prominent residents, speaking on behalf of their fellow citizens, promised cooperation between Ellentonians and plant officials. Mayor Risher lamented the loss of the town, but ensured residents would do whatever was asked of them. “It’s for the good of our country,” Risher said, “and I’m sure all of our people will cooperate.”<sup>72</sup> Mike Cassels offered an open invitation to the coming plant officials, saying “We will cooperate with AEC and DuPont to the fullest extent. We heartily welcome the project to this area, and I feel that

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> “Patriotic feeling flavored reaction to announcement,” *Augusta Chronicle*, November 29, 1970.

the people in Ellenton will also join with me.”<sup>73</sup> Basil Turner Brinkley, Sr. told a local reporter, “If the government wants my home for the defense of our liberties, then let them take it and do with it what they will.”<sup>74</sup>

The sense of patriotism exhibited by residents of the affected area is interesting given the state of the South in general and South Carolina in particular in 1950. While a number of recent events, most notably the Second World War, had helped accelerate the reunification of the South and the rest of the United States, by the beginning of the 1950s the South was still quite separated from other regions of the country. In 1948 South Carolina had been one of just three states that backed Strom Thurmond and the Dixiecrat party in the presidential election. While it may seem extraordinary that citizens who had backed Thurmond’s attempt to undermine the Democratic Party would comply with the government’s decision to construct the plant in their hometown, the residents of Ellenton’s patriotic response and sense of duty in sacrificing their homes show just how much the South and the nation had changed.

With both national and international concerns, the United States was experiencing the first wave of unrest and tension that would accompany the arms race of the Cold War. While the South was still its own unique entity, one that clung to segregation and saluted the playing of “Dixie,” Southerners had experienced the hardships of the Great Depression and World War II with the rest of the United States. By 1950, Southerners began to recognize greater national concerns as their own and viewed the threat of Soviet aggression as an immediate threat to their way of life. The South still had major

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<sup>73</sup> Bill Clark, “Huge growth is foreseen by CSRA,” *Augusta Chronicle*, November 29, 1950, 3.

<sup>74</sup> Shockley, “Strange calm settles over four towns to be moved for H-bomb installation,” 10.

problems that separated the region from the rest of the United States, but Southerners identified American threats as their own and showed that they were willing to contribute to the nation's defense.

The intense nationalism which had defined the South remained in the years following World War II. However, the postwar era witnessed a Southern reassessment of its identity and its enemies. The division between the South and the rest of the United States was deep, but these differences paled in comparison to the division between the United States and the Soviet Union. Southerners did not lose their defensive nature or their nationalistic impulses; they simply redrew the boundaries of their territory. The residents of Ellenton realized that the destruction of their town was not the result of federal intervention into Southern affairs, but rather an attempt to quell the greater Soviet menace which threatened the nation and the free world. Although Ellentonians certainly did not wish to leave their town behind, they recognized that their sacrifice was crucial to protecting not only the United States, but the South as well. The Soviet possession of an atomic bomb forced Southerners to recognize their shared identity with the rest of the United States.

Connie Steed, an Ellenton high school student, expressed the contradictions in the reaction of Ellentonians perhaps better than anyone when she told a reporter, "I think it is a wonderful thing since it is for the good of the nation, but there certainly are a lot of heartbroken people – including myself."<sup>75</sup> Like many residents in the area, Ms. Steed expressed a simultaneous feeling of heartbreak and pride in her reaction to the news that

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.



her home would be sacrificed. A sign quickly appeared on the road into Ellenton that read:

It is hard to understand why our town must be destroyed to make a bomb that will destroy someone else's town that they love as much as we love ours – but we feel that they picked not just the best spot in the U.S., but in the world. We love these dear hearts and gentle people who live in our home town.<sup>76</sup>

Ellentonians regretted the decision to sacrifice their town, but they made it readily apparent that they were willing to cooperate with the government. Problems with outside reporters and reimbursement of property would test residents' willingness to cooperate in the months that followed, but the immediate reaction of the citizens of Ellenton exhibited a desire to cooperate with government officials. While they mourned the loss of their homes and communities, the inhabitants of the condemned areas seemed willing to do whatever was asked of them in order to defend their nation.

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<sup>76</sup> Freeman, "Atomic plant area grieves at exodus," 17.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE ISOLATION OF ELLENTON

The announcement of the Savannah River Plant was cause for jubilation amongst the leaders of Aiken, South Carolina, and Augusta, Georgia. As the two largest cities in the Central Savannah River Area, Aiken and Augusta would reap the economic rewards that would naturally accompany such an enormous undertaking. The excitement over the economic stimulus that the plant would provide was tempered by the fact that local residents would soon be forced from their homes. Local political leaders were forced to walk a fine line, making sure not to appear too excited over the fate of nearby Ellenton. Perhaps the *New York Times* said it best: “In Augusta, Aiken, Barnwell and other places near the immediate area of the plant, the townspeople have no desire to behave indecently at a neighbor’s wake. Nevertheless, they find it hard to restrain great expectations of coming into a pot of money by this sudden demise of an area.”<sup>77</sup>

While residents in nearby cities attempted to publicly console those in Ellenton, Dunbarton, and Meyers Mill, they were simultaneously experiencing a sense of excitement not unlike that felt by the residents of Ellenton in the weeks before they received news of their town’s death. In many ways, the sacrifice of those in Ellenton was made all the more tragic in light of the fact that many residents felt an economic revival would soon reach the community. The prospect of oil or other natural resources being discovered in Ellenton and leading to an economic boom had raised the hopes of Ellentonians who had seen their economy slowly dying. With the news that Ellenton

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<sup>77</sup> Freeman, “Atomic neighbors foresee rich era,” 88.

would be deserted and an important nuclear facility would be built in the area, these dreams of prosperity were transferred from those in Ellenton to those in neighboring towns. Indeed, relocation of the residents of Ellenton and Dunbarton and the influx of construction workers and engineers led to an economic explosion in nearby Augusta and Aiken.

It is difficult to condemn those in the larger nearby cities for not supporting their neighbors in a time of need; there was certainly a shared sense of loss amongst the communities as many of the residents of Ellenton had friends and family in the area. However, the economic stimulus provided to Augusta and Aiken cannot be ignored in analyzing their public support for Ellenton and the other affected communities. The concerns and frustrations felt by the residents of Ellenton resulted from serious problems with the rising price of land and a sense of on-looker by those in nearby communities. The natural celebration which accompanied the announcement of such an economic miracle in the CSRA only furthered the feelings of abandonment among the residents of Ellenton, Dunbarton, and Meyers Mill.

The city of Aiken, once a sleepy winter retreat for the Northern elite and their horses, was completely transformed by the removal of Ellenton and owes much of its economic success to the numerous Savannah River Site employees who made Aiken their home. A quiet town of only 7,500 residents in 1950, Aiken experienced rapid growth in the wake of the plant's construction.<sup>78</sup> Property values in Aiken increased dramatically in

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

the weeks following the news that Ellenton would be evacuated, despite a promise from Aiken realtors that they would not raise prices.<sup>79</sup> The population soared as both SRS employees and the businessmen who sought to gain from the unique economic situation flocked to the city.

H. Odell Weeks, mayor of Aiken, responded to the news as if he had won the lottery. “I’m jubilant about the whole thing,” he said. “Aiken welcomes to the community the officials and all personnel who will be associated with the project to their community.” Weeks even went so far as to offer every new resident a personal welcome.<sup>80</sup> The arrival of plant workers into the community provided an economic jolt to a city which had previously been that quaint retreat for Northern equestrians. While the economic impact of these new residents would completely revitalize Aiken, Weeks was evidently well aware that sacrifices would have to be made. Mayor Weeks made a public gesture of cooperation with federal employees not unlike the gestures made by the residents of Ellenton, declaring, “The people in Aiken will be willing to cooperate with the Commission and will give every assistance possible toward making this a good location.”<sup>81</sup>

While Aiken may have experienced the most drastic changes from the arrival of the Savannah River Plant, Augusta, Georgia, experienced significant growth and only furthered its status as the dominant city of the CSRA. Located along the Savannah River on the border between South Carolina and Georgia, Augusta had a population of 70,000

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<sup>79</sup> “Wrong impression afloat,” *Aiken Standard*, December 6, 1950, p. 1.

<sup>80</sup> Clark, “Huge growth is foreseen by CSRA,” 3.

<sup>81</sup> “Patriotic feeling flavored reaction to announcement,” *Augusta Chronicle*, November 29, 1970.

residents in 1950 and served as the focal point of the local economy. “Now that the DuPont Company has some of its top men living in the area, we must recognize that this means the beginning of an industrial re-birth in the Central Savannah River area,” Lester Moody said. “The Savannah River Site was selected from a large number of locations scattered all over the country. This in itself is a test of what we have to offer to industries seeking new locations.”<sup>82</sup> As Moody realized as soon as it was announced, the Savannah River Plant would provide an economic stimulus to the region that was desperately needed.

W. D. Jennings, mayor of Augusta, echoed Odell Weeks’s sentiments, saying, “I would like to take the opportunity to congratulate the authorities on the selection of the Central Savannah River Area . . . as a site for this particular purpose. I also want to assure the parties in charge that the city welcomes them to this community and will cooperate with them in every way possible.”<sup>83</sup>

The secretary of the Augusta Chamber of Commerce, Lester S. Moody realized that the Savannah River Plant would bring significant changes to the community. Shortly after the announcement of the plant, he stated, “The coming of this one Government plant will equal the simultaneous installation of fifty small factories in Augusta.” Moody continued, “It will make Augusta a minor metropolis; our suburbs plan to ask the Reconstruction Finance Corporation for \$15,000,000 to expand our water and sewer works, schools, electric power system, hospital facilities.”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> “Plant means big boom for Augusta,” 1.

<sup>83</sup> Clark, “Huge growth is foreseen by CSRA,” 3.

<sup>84</sup> Freeman, “Atomic neighbors foresee rich era,” 88.

While community leaders realized that the Savannah River Plant would breathe new life into the region, not everyone in Aiken and Augusta welcomed the coming nuclear facility. Sarah Bush, secretary of the Aiken Chamber of Commerce, noted that Aiken had tried to maintain its sense of identity despite the rapidly arriving outsiders. Bush said, “Some people complain Aiken will never be the same, and of course, it won’t. But we have maintained our polo fields, golf courses, race tracks, parks, beautiful homes, and have kept all night life out so far.”<sup>85</sup> In an article for the *Washington Post* describing the city, an anonymous real estate agent in Aiken said, “Our winter folk must already hear the hum of the approaching hordes of white trash and roughnecks. They’re not going to like what’s going to happen, but I don’t quite know what they can do about it.” Another Aiken resident commented, “You come to Aiken to get away from things. Or at least you used to.”<sup>86</sup> Others in the CSRA realized that a population boom would bring about a host of new problems for the once quiet community. “Augusta has always been a wide-open town, but we have barred all honky-tonks and clip joints,” Hillary H. Magnum, secretary of the Merchants Association in Augusta, stated, “and have held prostitution and venereal disease to a minimum.”<sup>87</sup>

In addition to housing problems and concerns with the “night life” of those new to the community, the arrival of outsiders to the area would bring social and cultural concerns to the forefront. While he optimistically predicted a number of positive changes to the community, Lester Moody also realized that the new residents of the CSRA would

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<sup>85</sup> Freeman, “Atom plant D.P.s escape unscathed,” 7.

<sup>86</sup> George McMillan, “H-bomb invades aristocratic lair,” *Washington Post*, December 3, 1950, B3.

<sup>87</sup> Freeman, “Atom plant D.P.s escape unscathed,” 7.

bring more than just their wallets. Moody told the *New York Times*, “The new plant will bring in many educated people, technicians, professional men, highly skilled workers, Yankees and Middle Westerners with other viewpoints on race relations, labor relations, world affairs. We may not enjoy all the changes, but it is impossible to be conservative about our future.”<sup>88</sup> Moody correctly identified that an influx of “Yankees” into the area could lead to social tension as more liberal outsiders came face to face with life in the Jim Crow South. However, Moody argued that the sacrifices would have to be made in order to experience the many benefits that accompanied the plant. Moody stated, “The hand that shuns the thorn can’t have the rose.”<sup>89</sup>

Perhaps even more troubling than the arrival of outsiders was the perception that Aiken and Augusta were taking advantage of the situation in Ellenton. Ira Henry Freeman was correct in suggesting that the people of the CSRA had “no desire to behave indecently at a neighbor’s wake,” at least not publicly.<sup>90</sup> *The Aiken Standard* felt the need to run a special editorial addressing what it described as misconceptions and false accusations about the treatment of displaced persons by the residents of Aiken. The editorial, “Wrong Impression Afloat,” argued that the depiction of Aiken residents as “chop-licking” was inaccurate and noted that Aiken realtors had agreed to not raise prices. “If Aiken has seemed slow in extending a welcome, it has been through error of the head and not of the heart. The city officials and chamber of commerce have tried to

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<sup>88</sup> Freeman, “Atomic neighbors foresee rich era,” 88.

<sup>89</sup> Lang, “Camellias and H-Bombs,” 42.

<sup>90</sup> Freeman, “Atomic neighbors foresee rich era,” 88.

make a non-commercial approach to the people from hearts filled with sympathy for what they must give up for the sake of their country's good.”<sup>91</sup>

Despite this attempt to keep prices down, individual land and home owners in the area were not bound by the promises made by the realtors and property owners of the Aiken Chamber of Commerce. The cost of land in Barnwell jumped from \$30 an acre to \$100 an acre in less than a week.<sup>92</sup> As the months wore on, real estate prices skyrocketed. Kari Frederickson observed, “Farmland that had sold for between \$60 and \$80 an acre in 1950 was being snatched up in 1951 for trailer park locations at \$600 or \$700 an acre.”<sup>93</sup> Ira Henry Freeman noted the problems with inflation, writing, “This inflation goes on irresistibly, despite pious resolutions of real estate organizations in Barnwell, Aiken, Allendale and surrounding counties pledging no ‘undue’ rise in prices for property.”<sup>94</sup> The leaders of nearby communities could do little to prevent a spike in the price of land. Residents of Aiken and other nearby communities may have been upset at the perception that they were taking advantage of the displaced persons, but this stigma was only natural given the skyrocketing real estate prices in the area.

By the end of 1951, the predictions of significant economic growth in the community were already coming true. Lester S. Moody, who had encouraged industrial growth in the area, began to see the benefits of the plant in the first year. In November of 1951, Moody said, “It is certain that business in this area is better now than it has ever

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<sup>91</sup> “Wrong impression afloat,” 1.

<sup>92</sup> Freeman, “Atomic neighbors foresee rich era,” 88.

<sup>93</sup> Frederickson, “Confronting the Garrison State,” 363.

<sup>94</sup> Freeman, “Atomic neighbors foresee rich era,” 88.



been in the history of the region. We do not have to prove this; we have to admit it.” “Now that the Du Pont Company has some of its top men living in the area,” Moody stated, “we must recognize that this means the beginning of an industrial re-birth in the Central Savannah River area.”<sup>95</sup> According to Moody, the displacement of the residents was a necessary sacrifice. The economic impact of the Savannah River Plant was immediately understood by Moody. “Large enterprises of this kind always bring about dislocations and inconveniences,” he continued, “but in the long run the area will reap tremendous benefits. We should look towards the future and the progress that lies ahead.”<sup>96</sup>

Despite his enthusiasm for the project, Moody admitted that the plant had caused problems for the displaced. However, he felt that the problems of those in Ellenton and Dunbarton, as regrettable as they were, were necessary to secure the economic future of Augusta. “The Savannah River plant has brought numerous and varying problems,” Moody said, “but it has resulted in economic benefits to the area and those benefits far exceed and out-weight the problems.”<sup>97</sup>

The impact of the Savannah River Plant was certainly not lost on South Carolina politicians. While few politicians in the state had a direct hand in bringing the plant to the Ellenton area, many of South Carolina’s elected officials had pursued industrial interests in hopes of economic salvation. The Savannah River Plant provided an

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<sup>95</sup> “Moody sees many benefits due for area,” *Augusta Chronicle*, November 25, 1951, 10.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

economic jolt to the region that few could have predicted. And yet, despite their jubilation over the news of the plant, political leaders across the state took great strides to display a sense of reluctance over the arrival of the plant as well as sympathy for the displaced.

Edgar Brown, the state Senator representing neighboring Barnwell, was the only direct contact between DuPont officials and the state of South Carolina. Brown had actively campaigned for locating the plant in the Ellenton area and had helped tie the project to the soon to be completed Clarks Hill Dam.<sup>98</sup> Given Brown's involvement with the site selection process, it is interesting to note his reaction to the news. "While we are greatly pleased that this enormous industry is to be located in our area, we had hoped that the location would be restricted . . . so as not to interrupt the community life in the area." In a joint statement with local representative Solomon Blatt, he said, "We are interested in obtaining industry in this section of the state, but our first concern is the future of the people in the area affected."<sup>99</sup> Brown may have wished to portray himself as a man of the people and a friend to the displaced, but his actions had a larger role in the arrival of the plant than those of any other South Carolinian.

South Carolina politicians attempted to portray the arrival of the plant and the destruction of Ellenton as somehow being beyond the realm of politics. Burnett Maybank offered reassurance to residents that "politics didn't figure at all in the selection."<sup>100</sup> However, this did little to reassure the public. In addressing some of these

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<sup>98</sup> Reed, *Savannah River Site at Fifty*, 137.

<sup>99</sup> "Patriotic feeling flavored reaction to announcement," *Augusta Chronicle*, November 29, 1970.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

concerns and the rumors that sprung from them, George McMillan writes, “The most bewildering is a mounting barrage of congressional criticism that seems to have no clearer motivation than the fear that the project is, as a syndicated columnist recently alleged and as many Southerners believe, a Truman plot to bring trade unions and Fair Deal votes to the South.”<sup>101</sup> While the Ellenton area had proven an ideal location for such a plant, a sense of political motivation in the selection process pervaded the community.

Rumors began to spread through the community that Truman’s disdain for Strom Thurmond and James Byrnes had played a role in the site selection. The *New York Times* recounted a story that had been circulating throughout Washington, D.C., regarding the site selection: “The Atomic Energy Commission approached the Governments of forty-three states with areas available for the project. All of them asked to be excused on the ground that the hydrogen-bomb plant would be too dangerous. Finally the President said, ‘Put it in South Carolina. It’ll serve Jimmy Byrnes right.’”<sup>102</sup> Ironically, the same issue of the newspaper reports that James Byrnes had christened Truman’s Fair Deal the “high road to socialism.”<sup>103</sup> Vivian Milner addressed the troubling rumor in the *Aiken Standard*, writing, “Having the hydrogen bomb plant so near is serious for us. I hope that this story of how it was located doesn’t have any basis in fact.”<sup>104</sup> While personal politics may have had little to do with the actual site selection, the perception that the area had been selected based on tension between political leaders

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<sup>101</sup> George McMillan, “Snakes are H-bomb job’s least worry,” *Washington Post*, November 4, 1951, B1.

<sup>102</sup> “The Nation,” *New York Times*, December 3, 1950, E2.

<sup>103</sup> “Republicans map battle for south,” *New York Times*, December 3, 1950, 54.

<sup>104</sup> Vivian G. Milner, “The Looking Glass...,” *Aiken Standard*, December 20, 1950, 12.

furthered the sense of abandonment and isolation amongst the residents of the affected area.<sup>105</sup>

In the weeks following the announcement of the plant's construction, a number of newspapers and magazines attempted to weigh in on the fate of Ellenton. The *Augusta Chronicle*, the largest paper in the area, acknowledged the frustrations that would accompany the decision to evacuate Ellenton and its surrounding area, but urged residents throughout the CSRA to cooperate with the demands of the government. "It is important that our people realize that along with the good they must also accept the bitter fruits, the hardships and the inconveniences that are natural products of a huge undertaking like this," the editorial staff concluded. The Savannah River Plant "might someday preserve our security, and rescue the freedom of the world from those who would destroy it."<sup>106</sup> The publication offered sympathy for those who were to be displaced, but suggested that the sacrifice was necessary to preserve national security.

The *New York Times* presented a similar argument, but displayed at once a much more sympathetic and bombastic tone. The editorial staff wrote,

The people of Ellenton, S.C., seem to like the place where they live. That is what they said to Ira Henry Freeman of this newspaper, who went down to South Carolina to ask them. What goes for Ellenton goes also for those other residents in Barnwell and Allendale Counties, whose land will be taken by the Federal

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<sup>105</sup> The accusation of Truman's personal problems with James Byrnes and Strom Thurmond playing a role in the site selection holds little weight. As noted earlier, the Ellenton area and the Savannah River proved remarkably well-suited for such a facility. In addition to this, locating the Savannah River Plant in Ellenton as a vendetta against the two South Carolina politicians would prove incredibly short-sighted, as both men gained from the situation. While Byrnes witnessed an economic overhaul in a previously struggling corner of the state, Strom Thurmond gained significant financial and political capital by representing displaced landowners in court.

<sup>106</sup> "Afterthoughts," *Augusta Chronicle*, November 30, 1950, 4.

Government for work on the hydrogen bomb. Many who are sharecroppers and have no land of their own nevertheless love this soil. They are poor people and live simple lives, but they don't like having to go to a strange place and start all over again.

The editorial continued,

Apparently it can't be helped. If the national safety demands that we guard ourselves against an H-bomb attack by having an H-bomb of our own, then space will be needed somewhere and somebody will have to move. But it will do us good to think for a moment of the plain, old-fashioned qualities, emotions and virtues of those who dwell in the Ellenton neighborhood. People who love their homes and get on with their neighbors are the salt of democracy. They are a promise that dictatorships and enforced mass migrations will not win the day. And it is good to know that these folks are not going to some bleak Siberia but over the line a piece to some land much like that they will have to leave.<sup>107</sup>

While the editorial shows a sense of sympathy for those who were to be

displaced, it also attempts to justify its position by invoking grand themes of combating "dictatorships and enforced mass migrations." The editorial also glosses over the forced removal of the residents of Ellenton by suggesting they will simply move to another town in the area and find a new piece of land similar to the land they left. In doing so, the *New York Times* offered a simple and easy solution to what would prove a difficult and challenging problem. As many residents of Ellenton would discover, rising prices in nearby places made the search for similar land and housing to those they had left behind nearly impossible. Nevertheless, the *New York Times* made quite clear its feelings on the matter: although regrettable for the people of Ellenton, the evacuation of the land that would become the Savannah River Site was required to ensure the nation's security.

*Time* magazine offered a sympathetic view of the plight of Ellentonians. An article, "The Displaced," told of how "Work had come to a standstill and people gathered in small hushed groups to discuss the stunning news." The piece noted, "On the outskirts

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<sup>107</sup> "Ellenton," *New York Times*, December 12, 1950, 32.

of the project, towns and cities like Aiken, S.C. and Augusta, Ga. set to counting the blessings that would flow when upwards of 25,000 employees went to work at the giant H-bomb plant.” Continued *Time*, “Inside the area, however, sharecroppers and small farmers expressed only bewilderment and sadness. Most hoped to get jobs in the new plant, but even if they did, they knew that things would never be quite the same.”<sup>108</sup>

In an editorial addressing the construction of the Savannah River Plant, the *Washington Post* identified major concerns regarding the nature of the hydrogen bomb. The editorial stated, “This is manifestly a terrible weapon. The most compelling reason for seeking to obtain it is, of course, that it may be included in the armory of some other nation.” The editorial continued, “The same logic will, obviously, compel other nations to seek it once we begin our quest. Thus, to the race for supremacy in plutonium bombs will be added a race for supremacy in super-bombs.”<sup>109</sup> Although the Soviet Union had tested their first atomic weapon only a year earlier, the *Washington Post* realized that the nuclear arms race between the Soviet Union and the United States would only grow more intense with the American production of a hydrogen bomb. “There can, of course, be no enduring monopoly of any sort of scientific knowledge, and weapons that can be forged here can be forged elsewhere as well,” the editorial stated. “It would be the utmost folly, therefore, for Americans to suppose that any weapon could of itself afford them an impregnable security... Whether, in the end, the sheer frightfulness of hydrogen bombs

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<sup>108</sup> “The Displaced,” *Time*, December 11, 1950.

<sup>109</sup> “H-bomb project,” *Washington Post*, March 8, 1951, 8.

would be a deterrent to war or an impulse toward general annihilation, no one can surely say.”<sup>110</sup>

With the story of Ellenton occupying national attention, reporters began to flock to Ellenton. These reporters met with the town leaders and documented the frustration felt by those throughout the community. Despite their troubles, the people of Ellenton were quite open with these outsiders and shared their thoughts with anyone who would listen.

Some of the reporters who flocked to Ellenton were accused of distorting the truth and misrepresenting the people in the town. While there was certainly a degree of this misrepresentation taking place, most of the articles written in the months after the announcement were relatively fair in their assessment of the town and its people. However, many of the articles written about Ellenton and the displaced communities failed to capture the impact of the move on the African American sharecroppers in the area. Race may have certainly played a role in the lack of interviews with African Americans, but a more plausible reason lies in the fact that many of the sharecroppers were spread out in the nameless hamlets in the areas around Ellenton, Dunbarton, and Meyers Mill. The town of Ellenton was a more concentrated area which provided a larger base for interviews, but this concentration on Ellenton led to an unfortunate lack of input from the African American sharecroppers who populated the countryside.

Ellenton was chosen to house the Savannah River Site in part because of its relative isolation. Ironically, the town and its people were never more isolated than after

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<sup>110</sup> “In the midst of life,” *Washington Post*, February 3, 1951, 6.

the announcement of the community's death. While the residents of Ellenton were certainly outraged at the news, economic interests and national security concerns guaranteed that no one outside of the area would come to their aid.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### CHAOS IN ELLENTON

The entire fabric of life in Ellenton had changed when Louise Cassels awoke on November 29, 1950. Despite the emotional toll that the previous day had wrought, Cassels knew that life would have to continue in Ellenton, however altered it might be. Like many Ellentonians, she attempted to carry on with her normal routine despite the knowledge that the only home she had ever known would soon be gone.<sup>111</sup>

Although the residents of Ellenton knew that their town was living on borrowed time, few could have expected the chaos that would ensue following the announcement of their town's demise. In the days following the November 28 press conference, reporters from major newspapers, both local and national, flooded into Ellenton to interview the "H-bomb's first victims." In addition to the press, residents from throughout Georgia and South Carolina drove into Ellenton to get a glimpse of the town that would soon be eradicated. Tiny Ellenton, a town of less than 700 inhabitants, became an attraction that sightseers, reporters, and businessmen would flock to for the remainder of its life.

For all intents and purposes, the announcement of the move served as the end of Ellenton as its residents had known it. While they would be allowed to stay in the town until early 1952, the final months in Ellenton were unlike anything its residents had ever seen. Those in the affected area realized almost immediately that the communities they loved so dearly would never be the same. C.S. Anderson, a Dunbarton farmer, noted in his diary less than a week after the announcement, "another day of comotion all day dont

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<sup>111</sup> Cassels, *The Unexpected Exodus*, 15.

Suppose there will ever be another day of Happiness here Since the Government has come in and hit a death blow on this part of the world.”<sup>112</sup> A number of residents shared his sentiments and lamented the fate of their town.

Across Ellenton, Dunbarton, and Meyers Mill, residents tried to come to terms with the announcement that their community must be sacrificed. Stunned by the sudden announcement, farmers and sharecroppers of these communities tried to piece together what little information they had regarding the nature of the plant and the steps which would need to be taken to evacuate the community. Farmers faced uncertainty which threatened their plans for a 1951 crop. “To add to their mounting problems,” Louise Cassels writes, “Planting another year’s crop was contingent on when the Government would acquire their property.”<sup>113</sup> Due to the limited information released in the initial announcement of the plant, townspeople in the affected communities were left with numerous questions.

As noted earlier, on the day of the announcement of the plant, Mike Cassels commented, “I don’t know what we’ve got that our country needs – some say there’s a mysterious element in the soil – but whatever it is we’ll gladly give it regardless of sacrifice.”<sup>114</sup> It would be difficult to fault Mike Cassels for not knowing exactly why the government chose the Ellenton area, but his comments are indicative of another problem faced by residents: a lack of information as to the nature of the Savannah River Plant. In an effort to maintain the secrecy of the project, DuPont and the AEC had provided

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<sup>112</sup> Browder, *Memories of Home: Dunbarton and Meyers Mill*, 162.

<sup>113</sup> Cassels, *The Unexpected Exodus*, 40.

<sup>114</sup> Freeman, “Atomic Plant area grieves at exodus,” 17.

precious little information to the citizens. The only information that residents had regarding the plant was that it would prove vital in the construction of the hydrogen bomb.

It is worth noting that the hydrogen bomb was only theoretical in November 1950. AEC officials freely admitted that they could not be absolutely sure that the hydrogen bomb was feasible. In the *Washington Post* article announcing the construction of the plant, AEC Commissioner Sumner Pike “estimated that prospects of perfecting the H-bomb lie ‘somewhere between the possible and the probable.’”<sup>115</sup> While the hydrogen bomb was being touted as a means of strengthening national security, it was still only a concept. Ellentonians could be given no assurance that their sacrifice would prove necessary.

In an effort to provide information to the townspeople and assuage public concerns, the AEC held a meeting at the Ellenton School on November 29, 1950. The chief of land acquisition for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Gordon Britton, explained the steps that would have to be taken to begin relocating the people of Ellenton. Britton made it evident that the government wished to make the move as easy as possible. “We want to avoid court proceedings.” He continued, “Before we ask anyone to move we shall give a check to the owner . . . If you want to keep your buildings and equipment we’ll sell these back to you at salvage price so long as you remove them.”<sup>116</sup> Britton

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<sup>115</sup> “Tract of 250,000 acres selected in South Carolina for new plant,” *Washington Post*, November 29, 1950, 6.

<sup>116</sup> Freeman, “Atomic plant area grieves at exodus,” 17.

explained the intricacies of the government's plan for acquisition, including the offer to buy back homes for salvage price and the right of the landowners to take their case to court if they were unsatisfied with the government's appraisal.

While he attempted to calm some of the tension and anxiety that had been brewing among the townspeople, Gordon Britton showed a complete lack of understanding as to the true sacrifice being asked of the residents of Ellenton. Britton stated, "We aim to give you enough to buy another place just as good outside the area."<sup>117</sup> His statement was obviously designed to provide reassurance of the federal government's promise to reimburse Ellentonians, but the claim that they could find land "just as good outside the area" ignores the fact that this was *their* land. In purely economic terms, there was indeed better land to be found across the CSRA. But it wasn't *their* land; it wasn't the land that many of the town's residents had called home their entire lives.

A high school student at the time, Stephen Harley, recalled the meeting at the school: "They had the meeting to kind of cool our nerves, you know. There was a du Pont official there telling us how good they were going to be to us and how much money they were going to pay us for our land and everything. We were just going to have heaven right here on earth! We had heaven already. We just didn't know it, but I knew it."<sup>118</sup>

There were immediate problems with the plan for appraisal and acquisition presented by Gordon Britton. One of most pressing concerns was the fate of those who lived and farmed in the first area to be evacuated. In order to build the administrative

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Browder, *Memories of Home: Ellenton*, 160.

buildings that would serve as the headquarters for the construction process, farmers in the first designated area would have to be moved immediately. David Cato, one of the farmers in the first area, discovered a construction crew on his property and was forced to seek a court order to delay the destruction of his property. He had not been consulted and his land and home had yet to be appraised.<sup>119</sup> Arthur Foreman was given inadequate time to sell his cows and as a result discovered that his pasture fences had been cut, allowing his cows to wander onto the railroad track.<sup>120</sup>

Another problem which would soon come to the forefront was that anyone who refused to take the government's initial offer would not be able to buy their homes at salvage price. This severely hampered the residents' ability to receive a fair value for their home and their land. Selling homes back to the residents at salvage prices was meant to cover the expense of moving a home from the community. By removing this incentive for those who refused the initial offer, officials in charge of land acquisition could effectively strong-arm local residents into taking whatever they offered.

Despite the problems that resulted from rushed construction and inaccurate or non-existent appraisals, the meeting at the school provided much needed information to the townspeople. Gordon Britton helped ease tensions to a degree by providing a better understanding of the system of appraisal and the plan for repurchasing homes. A clear timetable for evacuation was set out, allowing local farmers to plan accordingly. While the meeting at the school had been a first step in calming a panicked public, a number of

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<sup>119</sup> Stephen Harley, interview.

<sup>120</sup> Cassels, *The Unexpected Exodus*, 47.

events would soon leave Ellenton even more chaotic than after the initial announcement of the plant.

One of the first signs of the change to come occurred with a traffic jam on Sunday, December 3, 1950. “Ellenton had never before had a traffic jam,” Louise Cassels wrote. “This was something new.” Cassels admits she was startled by the sudden appearance of so many strangers in the town, but notes, “My heartbeat slowed down after I realized curiosity seekers had come to scrutinize the little town destined to die.”<sup>121</sup> Stephen Harley recalled sitting in awe of the cars, noting that one “could see license plates from every state in the union.”<sup>122</sup> While almost everyone was initially in awe of the spectacle, many quickly grew tired of being an attraction for sightseers. The traffic jam on December 3 would prove to be merely the first in a number of events which would test the hospitality of once quiet Ellenton.

While Mike Cassels had stated that he was glad there was no resentment towards the government, the decision to evacuate Ellenton certainly brought out a degree of anger amongst the residents. As could be expected, the arrival of on-lookers and reporters did not sit well with Ellentonians. While many in the town were quite courteous and respectful to their new guests, others resented those that would turn their sorrow into spectacle. “Disgusted and annoyed by so much publicity,” Louise Cassels noted, “everyone resorted to dodging [the media], and apparently derived a retributive enjoyment in playing hide-and-seek.”<sup>123</sup> Some citizens felt that the town was being

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>122</sup> Stephen Harley, interview.

<sup>123</sup> Cassels, *The Unexpected Exodus*, 35.

misrepresented by photographers who chose to show only the most run-down and unattractive homes and buildings in Ellenton.<sup>124</sup> Indeed, misrepresentation of the town and its people would remain a complaint of Ellentonians for many years.

The people of Ellenton would be the first to tell you that the town was nothing special. That is not to suggest that the people there did not love their home; many greeted the news of the town's approaching demise with a deep sense of sadness and loss. But the residents understood that their community resembled so many others in the American South. It had its strengths and weaknesses, its mansions and its dilapidated shacks, its rich and its poor. Even Louise Cassels, whose memoir of the final days of Ellenton showed a deep affection for the town, describes old Ellenton as "a ragged person with well-formed features and a fine physique."<sup>125</sup> What's truly remarkable is that the resentment towards journalists who chose to present the place as run-down and slum-ridden was not born out of a belief that Ellenton was superior to other towns; on the contrary, the residents of Ellenton believed that their town was completely and utterly normal. They loved it because it was *theirs*.

Stephen Harley voiced his frustration with the treatment of the press, saying, "If you make out like people down there are dumb, ignorant, backwards, trifling, and don't know what's going on, you can do them anyway. And we got done anyway. And when that happens there ain't nothing to do but pray."<sup>126</sup> Like many others in the town, Harley felt that their situation was being exploited and the true nature of the community was

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<sup>124</sup> Stephen Harley, interview. Beverly Cato Millians, interview.

<sup>125</sup> Cassels, *The Unexpected Exodus*, 4.

<sup>126</sup> Stephen Harley, interview.

being obscured. “Why didn’t they give us a little bit better treatment in the newspaper, a little bit more in compensation? We made the biggest sacrifice.”<sup>127</sup> The animosity amongst the townspeople towards outsiders, and reporters in general, grew steadily in the days and weeks after their arrival.

The animosity that had built in the first weeks following the announcement finally turned into full-blown hostilities with a fight at the Ellenton Baptist Church between local residents and reporters. On Sunday, December 10, 1950, Ike Vern and Booton Herndon, journalists with *Redbook* magazine, attempted to photograph church members as they departed following the morning service. As church goers began to exit the building, a fight ensued between the two journalists and members of the congregation. Herndon stated that they had been attacked for “no apparent reason,” but ill will towards the two men had been festering in the town throughout the week. An unidentified witness told the *New York Times* that “the two journalists had been trying to make ‘us look like a bunch of rubes.’”<sup>128</sup> Herndon was quoted by the *Augusta Chronicle* as saying that Vern had remarked, “Why’re you walking so fast, church goers?”<sup>129</sup> While that may not alone have been justifiable reason to start a fight, given the two weeks that Ellentonians had endured, it is not surprising that a brawl erupted.

The fight at the Ellenton Baptist Church was one of the first public displays of resentment toward journalists who had arrived in their town. John Steed, police chief in

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> “Two from magazine in bomb site fracas,” *New York Times*, December 11, 1950, 18.

<sup>129</sup> “‘Roughed up’ at Ellenton two journalists declare,” *Augusta Chronicle*, December 11, 1950.



Ellenton, attempted to defend the churchgoers, saying “some people have been confused and hardly responsible for their actions.”<sup>130</sup> The townspeople were described as being resentful of the “invasion of outsiders into the area.”<sup>131</sup> The journalists claimed that they had been given permission by Pastor R. D. Parkerson to photograph outside of the church and that Parkerson had even gone so far as to suggest good angles. They asserted that the entire thing was one big misunderstanding. According to Booton Herndon, townspeople had told the journalist and his partner to “start walking and keep walking until you get out of town.” Obviously upset at his treatment by Ellentonians, Herndon claimed, “I wouldn’t come back to South Carolina if the governor invited me.”<sup>132</sup>

Louise Cassels played the organ in the Ellenton Baptist Church. After completing the postlude, Cassels exited the church and witnessed the aftermath of the brawl. “A free-for-all fight had taken place. The Ellenton men had finished their job in seconds and quietly vanished from the scene. Bruised photographers emerged from the melee with bloody noses, torn coats and shirts. Broken cameras were strewn in every direction. The owners were still gathering up the pieces when I jumped into my car and hurried away. The incident was regrettable, but I couldn’t help feeling that the stubborn photographers had brought it on themselves.”<sup>133</sup>

Residents may have felt justified in defending their privacy in the final months of Ellenton’s existence, but the fight with the *Redbook* journalists was exactly the kind of press the townspeople did not need. While the leading residents of Ellenton and local

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<sup>130</sup> “In the Ring,” *Time*, December 25, 1950.

<sup>131</sup> “Redbook staffers beaten at site of H-bomb project,” *Washington Post*, December 11, 1950, B7.

<sup>132</sup> “‘Roughed up’ at Ellenton two journalists declare,” *Augusta Chronicle*, December 11, 1950.

<sup>133</sup> Cassels, *The Unexpected Exodus*, 77.

cities such as Aiken and Augusta had declared that they would welcome their new residents with open arms, the fight at the Ellenton Baptist Church showed that a sense of bitterness and resentment existed among some citizens. It may well have been provoked by Herndon and Vern, but the fight at the church served to undermine the sense of friendly openness that the inhabitants had hoped to foster. Ellentonians claimed that the townspeople had been upset at their portrayal by the two journalists, but whatever damage may have been done by the article in *Redbook* was overshadowed by the scuffle at the church.

The conflict at the Baptist church was the result of nearly two weeks of growing resentment and bitterness towards those who were documenting their sorrow. The mere presence of outside reporters and photographers may have been enough to cause aggravation amongst Ellentonians. With the accusations that these journalists were intentionally misrepresenting the town and its people, a confrontation between the two camps became inevitable.

The first weeks following the announcement were filled with disappointment and growing desperation for residents. The news that their town would be destroyed was followed by difficulties in dealing with government officials and a biased account of the town by reporters. Despite the arrival of the holiday season, Ellentonians found it difficult to continue with business as usual. Recalling the many troubles that confronted the community in the final days of 1950, Louise Cassels noted, “Christmas of all seasons, symbolic of peace and joy, produced only frustration and hardship.”<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid, 41.

While the majority of residents in Ellenton were given until March 1, 1952, to move, it became abundantly clear in the days and weeks following the November 28 announcement that even in the limited time remaining, Ellenton would never be the same. This was a new Ellenton, an Ellenton comprised of traffic jams and reporters, sightseers and on-lookers, government officials and small farmers. The peace and tranquility which had defined Ellenton were over.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **MOVING OUT**

The final year in Ellenton was filled with many of the same problems that had plagued the area in the weeks immediately following the announcement of the plant. Throughout 1951 the residents of Ellenton attempted to deal with the evacuation despite the frustratingly slow response and often arbitrary rulings of appraisers. While Ellentonians fought to secure fair compensation for their property, a series of events involving profiteering and racial tension at the plant only furthered a local sense of anger regarding outsiders and the area's portrayal in the media. In addition to these problems, the residents of Ellenton, Dunbarton, and Meyers Mill were forced to cope with the emotional distress that accompanied leaving their homes and communities behind.

Few things raised the ire of the citizens of Ellenton more than the problems with home appraisals. As soon as the government's plan for acquisition was announced, problems began to arise concerning the validity and fairness of the appraisals and the lack of options that accompanied refusal of the initial offer. Louise Cassels noted that tensions were high in the first few weeks as the residents of Ellenton sat in anticipation of the first appraisals. Local landowners sensed that these first offers would set the course for all subsequent appraisals.

While residents had been pessimistic, the first appraisals seemed to satisfy landowners. Cassels recalled that she and her sister Mamie had been thrilled to learn that Jimmy Stone, one of the first local landowners to have his land appraised, had been thoroughly satisfied with the government's offer and had appeared in the local papers

smiling while accepting the government's check. "After the second week of satisfactory negotiations the people relaxed; they expected later transactions to follow the same pattern."<sup>135</sup> Unfortunately for the Ellentonians, this would not be the case.

As the weeks went on and the appraisals continued, Ellentonians became increasingly concerned with the fairness of the appraisals. The mother of Stephen Harley was informed of the government's offer and promptly told the officials who had delivered it to get off her land. The government proposed forty-two dollars an acre, an offer that Harley felt was offensively low considering the improvements to the land (fences, barns) and the presence of a stream. In addition to this, the Harleys had lived on that land for generations and even had a family cemetery on the property. Stephen Harley recalled, "Forty-two dollars an acre for land that had been in our family for generations and wasn't for sale for any price. They couldn't have printed enough money."<sup>136</sup>

In an effort to attain higher appraisals for their homes, a few of the residents of Ellenton and the surrounding communities completed renovations to their homes and improved the appearance of their property. L. M. Schumpert and his wife hurried to complete their new home in Dunbarton. Interviewed by the *New York Times*, Schumpert said, "We can finish the house in three weeks and might as well live in it. Anyway, when the Government buys us out I figure we'll get more for a completed house."<sup>137</sup> Louise Cassels noted that "everyone was busy renovating his home – not for a festive occasion

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<sup>135</sup> Cassels, *The Unexpected Exodus*, 45.

<sup>136</sup> Stephen Harley, interview.

<sup>137</sup> Freeman, "Atomic neighbors foresee rich era," 88.

but for the appraisal.” She described the town as a “well-groomed corpse lying in state for friends and relatives to admire before taking the body to its last resting place.”<sup>138</sup>

Like so many others in Ellenton, Louise Cassels waited for months for her home to be appraised. The delay in appraisal naturally led to a delay in compensation. Cassels noted that this caused problems with her plans to move out because she could not begin construction on a new home until she received money from the government. “In about two weeks, we’d have the house plans,” Cassels wrote. “But the contract for construction couldn’t be let until the Government appraised and paid us for our home. We had no ready cash. We felt like caged birds.”<sup>139</sup>

Louis Cassels’s experience was not uncommon. Although the appraisers began operations within the first few weeks of the announcement, the process dragged on for months. As Kari Frederickson noted, “Some residents found themselves in a bind: with precious little cash on hand and no appraiser in sight, they could only watch helplessly as prices for property outside the plant’s perimeter soared.”<sup>140</sup> Those who were lucky enough to have their homes appraised found the money to be insufficient for buying similar property in the area. “The money we got sure didn’t go far,” said Alice Risher. “Now we own only a few lots in Jackson, and a little bit of land around New Ellenton.”<sup>141</sup> While AEC officials insured Ellentonians that they would be compensated for their sacrifice and offered market value for their homes and land, there was an inherent disadvantage for the displaced residents that few foresaw. Even if Ellentonians had been

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<sup>138</sup> Cassels, *The Unexpected Exodus*, 50.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>140</sup> Frederickson, “Confronting the Garrison State,” 376.

<sup>141</sup> “SRP begins new decade this week,” *Augusta Chronicle*, November 27, 1960.

compensated in a timely manner, which many were not, the skyrocketing property values in nearby towns meant that many would have to leave not only Ellenton, but the entire CSRA.

When the appraisers finally arrived at Louise Cassels' home in October 1951, she encountered first-hand just how frustrating the appraisals could be. She noted that her home was appraised on four separate occasions before the government made an offer. Cassels was given no explanation for the delay. And when the government finally made an offer Cassels found it to be several thousand dollars less than she had expected.<sup>142</sup> She noted that to contest the appraisal in court would be seemingly pointless: "If we sued, according to previous cases, we'd probably win an increase. But expenses of the suit would reduce our gain to practically nothing."<sup>143</sup> Like many residents of Ellenton, Cassels experienced immense frustration in trying to secure just compensation for her home.

For some, the process of home appraisal seemed surreal. As Stephen Harley stated, this land was not for sale. The residents of Ellenton had to sit by and watch as government agents attempted to put a price tag on things the residents regarded as priceless. Hardly any residents seemed satisfied with the money the appraisers offered. Tensions between the residents of Ellenton and the appraisers of the Land Acquisition Division would remain high throughout the remainder of the town's existence.

With tempers flaring and tension rising in Ellenton, one of South Carolina's most prominent citizens inserted himself into the middle of the chaotic spectacle. Following

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<sup>142</sup> Cassels, *The Unexpected Exodus*, 69.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, 70.

the end of his term as governor, Strom Thurmond moved to the Aiken area to practice law. For Thurmond, news of the Savannah River Plant and the displacement of farmers in the condemned towns provided a unique opportunity for financial and political gain. Sensing that local jurors would be extremely sympathetic to displaced farmers and landowners, Thurmond offered to represent those in Ellenton who wished to take their cases to court. “Judges instructed the jury not to consider emotional pleas when making its determination,” Kari Frederickson commented. “Nevertheless Thurmond always managed to pluck the heartstrings of sympathetic jurors, and government attorneys were loathe to object too strenuously so as not to appear callous.”<sup>144</sup> Thurmond took on the cases free of charge with the stipulation that he would receive a third of the increase in compensation.<sup>145</sup> “By winning large returns for landowners,” Frederickson wrote, “Thurmond strengthened his image as a defender against federal encroachment.”<sup>146</sup> In addition to the political boost that was desperately needed following the only in-state loss of his political career, Thurmond earned thousands of dollars by securing large increases in federal compensation for local farmers.

It would be disingenuous to suggest that everyone in the towns of Ellenton, Dunbarton and Meyers Mill greeted the news of the coming plant as a tragedy. While there were certainly a number of residents throughout the area who mourned the loss of their communities and their way of life, many of the areas sharecroppers, the overwhelming majority of whom were African American, benefitted greatly from the

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<sup>144</sup> Kari Frederickson, “New Introduction,” *The Unexpected Exodus* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), xxv.

<sup>145</sup> Jack Bass and Marilyn W. Thompson, *Ol’ Strom* (Marietta: Longstreet Press, 1998), 135.

<sup>146</sup> Frederickson, *The Unexpected Exodus*, xxv.



forced exodus. In documenting the area for the *New York Times*, Ira Henry Freeman observed that many of these individuals improved their quality of living as a result of displacement. Wrote Freeman, “A sharecropper who gets hired on the project to push a wheelbarrow will have cash money in the bank for the first time in his life. His family will abandon their miserable, unpainted shack in the cotton field, buy a jalopy and live like townfolks.” In many ways, the arrival of the plant led to an improvement in living conditions for sharecroppers. Numan V. Bartley writes, “The magnitude of southern black poverty made the living standard of whites appear prosperous by comparison.”<sup>147</sup> A number of these non-landowning sharecroppers hoped to gain employment at the plant. Freeman correctly predicted that “many of the uprooted agricultural workers will never go back to the soil.”<sup>148</sup>

Sharecroppers, however, were not exempt from the hardships that plagued their landowning neighbors. There were a number of distinct disadvantages for sharecroppers, most notably the fact that they did not own land. Numan Bartley wrote, “African Americans were much more likely to be tenants; seven out of ten white farmers were landowners in 1950, but only three in ten black farmers owned the land they worked.”<sup>149</sup> Unlike the landowning farmers in the area, local sharecroppers would receive no compensation for the land that they had farmed for decades. As a result, African American sharecroppers were some of the first to move from the community. While landowning residents were forced to contend with the slow appraisal process, those who

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<sup>147</sup> Numan V. Bartley, *The New South: 1945-1980* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1996), 116.

<sup>148</sup> Freeman, “Atomic neighbors foresee rich era,” 88.

<sup>149</sup> Bartley, *The New South*, 125.

did not own land were free to leave immediately. The luckiest sharecroppers received reimbursement for the crops that were destroyed in the wake of construction, but this was not a common occurrence. They also experienced the same problems regarding rising housing prices and the general difficulties that accompanied being forced to move.

As the residents of the condemned communities dealt with the numerous problems with home appraisals, the perception that the displaced persons were being taken advantage of only deepened. In March 1951, it was revealed that information regarding the site selection had leaked out of the Atomic Energy Commission and a businessman from Utah had profited from the information. Walter V. Pace of Salt Lake City, Utah, had purchased ninety-one acres of land in Aiken shortly before the announcement. Having purchased the land for \$44,000, Pace later sold the land to a housing developer for \$120,000. “In Salt Lake City, Mr. Pace, who is president of the Palace Meat Company, declared that ‘there’s nothing irregular in the purchase,’” the *New York Times* reported. “Asked why he was dealing in South Carolina real estate, he replied: ‘I move around quite a bit.’”<sup>150</sup>

Four separate investigations were launched after the news of Pace’s land deal came to light, with the AEC, the FBI, the Joint Congressional Committee on Atomic Energy, and the state of South Carolina each examining the incident. Brien McMahon, a U.S. Senator from Connecticut and head of the Congressional Atomic Energy Committee, announced before the Senate, “If anyone thinks he is going to make any

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<sup>150</sup> “Byrnes asks inquiry on atomic land deal,” *New York Times*, March 6, 1951, 19.

unholy profits or any illegal profits and get away with it, I simply wish to state that this will not occur.”<sup>151</sup>

The source of the leak was quickly discovered. W. Conrad McKelvey, responsible for housing and community relations for the area’s AEC office, was dismissed for disclosing the information of the SRP to Pace.<sup>152</sup> In the wake of the news that the leak had occurred from inside the AEC, Senator McMahon stated, “I know that I speak for all members of the joint committee in saying that we are distressed to learn of this breach of trust.”<sup>153</sup> The land sold to Pace was not land that was to be used for the Savannah River Plant, but rather land surrounding the condemned area that was well-suited for a housing development. The revelation that profiteering had begun before the news of the plant was even announced merely served as a further slap in the face to those in Ellenton.

Pace was almost certainly not the only person to take advantage of the situation in Ellenton. Edgar Brown, the state’s lone contact for AEC officials in the site selection process, was accused of participating in profiteering and was investigated by the FBI. “The politicians would rather close the case, but the FBI is still investigating a high South Carolina official in connection with land speculation at the hydrogen bomb plant near Aiken, SC,” the *Washington Post* reported. “His name is Edgar Brown, president of the South Carolina Senate, who formed a real estate syndicate and bought up options on 2000 acres one day before the H-bomb site was announced.” Brown stated that he had not

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<sup>151</sup> Lawrence, W.H., “Land grab feared at U.S. bomb plant,” *New York Times*, March 7, 1951, 19.

<sup>152</sup> “Atom board ousts aide for land ‘tip’,” *New York Times*, March 13, 1951, 6.

<sup>153</sup> “Acts on atom site ‘leak’,” *New York Times*, March 14, 1951, 7.

profited from the deal and had only tried to entice a housing contractor to the area to “help the community.”<sup>154</sup> While Brown would never be charged with any crime stemming from the investigation, the appearance of impropriety by one of South Carolina’s most powerful leaders deepened the sense of abandonment among those in the community.

From the moment construction began, labor issues at the plant dominated local news. Congressional investigations into hiring practices and union-related issues caused construction at the plant to start and stop at a dizzying rate. While union issues were responsible for the bulk of the labor problems at the plant, accusations of discrimination in hiring at the plant caused the biggest stir in the community. Ironically, two of the most diametrically opposed organizations in American history, the NAACP and the Ku Klux Klan, would each claim that their constituency had been discriminated against by the plant. For Ellentonians, who had hoped to be portrayed as kind and peaceful in the media, the accusations of discrimination and the appearance of the KKK only furthered a sense that the area was somehow behind the times, even in the era of Jim Crow.

In July 1951, the NAACP claimed that union leaders in Augusta were preventing the hiring of African Americans at the plant. These accusations came on the heels of other charges of bias in hiring matters. Months earlier, the American Veterans Committee issued a statement in which it accused the Atomic Energy Commission of

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<sup>154</sup> Drew Pearson, “H-Bomb Land Deal Still Studied,” *Washington Post*, April 22, 1951, B5.

“outdoing the South in racial discrimination.”<sup>155</sup> Rather than blaming the AEC for the discrimination, NAACP leaders pinpointed “little, two-by-four” unions in Augusta as the problem. The *New York Times* reported, “R.A. Brooks, local representative of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, said that the du Pont Company . . . would not hire workers without the recommendation of the union. And the union would recommend only white persons for skilled jobs, he asserted.”<sup>156</sup>

Interestingly, the Ku Klux Klan argued that they were being discriminated against as well. As the grand dragon of the Ku Klux Klan in South Carolina, Thomas L. Hamilton swore that he would “raise a stink.” Hamilton complained that “some members had been dismissed and that jobs had been denied others at the project.”<sup>157</sup> The arrival of the Ku Klux Klan surprised plant officials and served as a stark reminder to those new to the community that the South would not change overnight as a result of the plant’s construction. George McMillan writes, “It came as a surprise to many of the project’s officials that the robed organization is not a legend but a political reality here, and workers with this affiliation have had to be fired.”<sup>158</sup> The appearance of the Klan, which had held a large rally near the plant in January 1951, troubled Ellentonians who had hoped for an easy transition and less attention in town’s final days.

The news of Walter Pace’s attempt to capitalize on their misfortune and continued labor issues at the plant only deepened the sense of chaos in the community. While many residents in Ellenton had hoped to enjoy their final months in Ellenton, the problems that

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<sup>155</sup> “A.V.C. scores bias at atomic plants,” *New York Times*, July 29, 1951, 47.

<sup>156</sup> “Hydrogen bomb unit accused of race bias,” *New York Times*, September 19, 1951, 20.

<sup>157</sup> “Anti-Klan bias charged,” *New York Times*, October 23, 1951, 27.

<sup>158</sup> George McMillan, “Snakes are H-bomb job’s least worry,” B1.

occurred in the first weeks after the announcement of the plant only worsened in the town's last days. Resentment regarding their mistreatment by outsiders deepened, while the troubles at the plant only worsened the reputation of the area. In much the same way that the fight with the *Redbook* reporters and the instant rise in the price of land had enraged and frustrated the residents of Ellenton, the news of profiteering by outsiders and the appearance of the NAACP and Ku Klux Klan angered Ellentonians and furthered the sense of resentment towards those who had taken advantage of their unfortunate situation.

Despite the distractions at the plant, homes continued to be appraised and Ellentonians continued to slowly leave their town behind. While residents like Louis Cassels would experience problems with the appraisals until just before the town's death, the majority took the money they were offered and moved to a new town. "Nobody has suffered, except for sentimental reasons," said Arthur Foreman.<sup>159</sup> Others echoed his sentiments, including Mike Cassels, who stated, "Everyone is better off than before." "We've got over that first shock," Cassels said. "People have adjusted. Some have nicked a slice off old Uncle Sugar."<sup>160</sup> It's interesting that in the same article in which Cassels comments that "everyone is better off than before" he acknowledges that the Savannah River Plant was purchasing 9,000 gallons of gasoline a day from him. While many of Ellenton's citizens may have been better off following the exodus, few benefitted like Mike Cassels. And yet, even with his financial gain from the arrival of the

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<sup>159</sup> Freeman, "Atom plant D.P.s escape unscathed," 7.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

plant, he shared in the sense of loss felt by many Ellentonians. “Of course, I get a little low when I consider that after the Government kicks me out I’ll never again see the place where I and my father and grandfather were born,” Cassels said. “But I bet I live to die of old age.”<sup>161</sup> R. Hunter Kennedy, who worked for the AEC as a land acquisition engineer, noted that he felt the residents had received overly just compensation. The prices offered to the residents were “more than this poor farm soil ever would have brought normally.”<sup>162</sup>

By the fall of 1950, many of Ellenton’s residents had relocated. For those that remained, the relocation of homes and churches presented an unusual scene in the town. Daniel Lang writes, “At present, the tardier of the dispossessed are witnessing changes that they find only slightly less startling than they found the announcement that they would have to leave.”<sup>163</sup> Louise Cassels recalled, “It was a strange sight to see a familiar home jacked up on the chassis of a truck moving up the highway. Behind it followed a long string of cars at a funeral’s pace.”<sup>164</sup> The moving of homes proved to be a massive undertaking and served as a jarring reminder of the fate that awaited the town as a whole. In addition to the nicer homes, many of the churches in Ellenton were relocated to nearby towns. Recalled Thelma Ellis, “I watched my neighbors move their houses by my house and it didn’t bother me, but when that church (Meyers Mill Baptist) went by my house, I sat down and cried. I’m not a very emotional person, but that was too much.”<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Freeman, “Atom plant D.P.s escape unscathed,” 7.

<sup>163</sup> Lang, “Camellias and H-Bombs,” 40.

<sup>164</sup> Cassels, *The Unexpected Exodus*, 61.

<sup>165</sup> Browder, *Memories of Home: Dunbarton and Meyers Mill Remembered*, 156.

The emotional distress that accompanied the removal of homes and churches was nothing compared to the excavation of local cemeteries. From the moment of the government's arrival in Ellenton, the fate of those graveyards had proven a touchy subject. While they had no qualms in cutting down the fences of local farmers, government officials actually began to put up fences around small cemeteries. Louise Cassels recalled seeing a fence placed around a headstone that a local funeral home director had used for advertising purposes. The incident seemed to highlight the absurdity that the last year in Ellenton had brought. Cassels said, "How ridiculous! The Government had built [fences] to protect the dead and torn down the ones needed to protect the living."<sup>166</sup>

Stephen Harley remembered that an official with the federal government promised him that a fence would be placed around his family's cemetery. The official told Harley that he would be able to return to the plant gates at any time and have a guard escort him to the site. This turned out to be far from the truth. "They told us as long you live, as long as any of your family lived, you could always come back to that cemetery," Harley said. He later discovered the cemetery had been moved to Williston, South Carolina.<sup>167</sup>

Some in the town had reacted to the news of cemetery excavations with horror. Marion Brinkley remembered a conversation he had with Lorena Stark in which the local waitress expressed her desire to prevent the relocation of her parents' graves. Brinkley recalled,

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<sup>166</sup> Cassels, *The Unexpected Exodus*, 49.

<sup>167</sup> Stephen Harley, interview.



She said, 'Marion, what are you going to do 'bout your parents and all?' I said, 'Well, I guess I'm going to move them,' and she said, 'Well, I'm not moving mine!' And then she told me what she was going to do. She got a colored fella and they went back there and she dug a hole, pulled up the tombstones, and buried them. She said, 'I'm going to leave mine there. I'll guarantee you, they'll never find them.'<sup>168</sup>

For the residents of Ellenton, the excavation of graves proved to be one of the most disheartening and emotional aspects of the relocation.

The forced evacuation of Ellenton proved a traumatic experience for the town's residents. The families that moved immediately and those that stayed until the final days each experienced their own unique problems. Some in Ellenton chose to leave as soon as possible due to the circus-like atmosphere in the town. "As soon as we got paid for the property, we had to leave," said Blanche Crawford Walker. "That's all I was waiting on. Oh, it got so crowded. People just going in every direction."<sup>169</sup> For others, their homes proved to be in crucial areas that needed to be cleared immediately, forcing a hasty exit from Ellenton. "Our family was one of the first to move out," Beverly Cato Williams recalled, "so we didn't even have a chance to grieve with everyone in the town."<sup>170</sup>

For those that remained until its final days, witnessing the town's slow unraveling proved especially disheartening. "They say the good lord ain't gonna give you more than you can handle," Stephen Harley said. "But sometimes I wonder. Sometimes I wonder."<sup>171</sup> Mike Cassels noted the hardships that those in Ellenton faced in the last days, saying, "So much has been happening around here that many nights I didn't know

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<sup>168</sup> Browder, *Memories of Home: Reminiscences of Ellenton*, 162.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid, 163.

<sup>170</sup> Beverley Cato Millians, interview.

<sup>171</sup> Stephen Harley, interview.

whether to take three slugs of gin, an aspirin, or go to a prayer meeting.”<sup>172</sup> C. S.

Anderson, a farmer from Dunbarton, wrote in his diary, “hope God will give me courage and strength to leave the old familiar places with a Smile instead of shedding tears.”<sup>173</sup>

The realization that the only homes they had ever known would soon be gone took a heavy toll on the residents of Ellenton. Daniel Lang writes,

Anticipation of the assessor’s visit, ... has not entirely distracted the Ellentonians from their plight. There are too many cheerless reminders of the community’s imminent disappearance for that – fields reverting to brush, houses in disrepair, empty shelves in the stores.<sup>174</sup>

Marion Brinkley recounted his Uncle Fred’s difficulty in dealing with the situation, saying, “I know Uncle Fred [Brinkley] when it came time to move his home, he had already moved the farm house, he sat there in the living room and cried like a baby. He said, ‘This thing’s just killing me. I can’t get myself together.’”<sup>175</sup> While the loss of her home affected her deeply, Louise Cassels was especially distraught at having to leave behind the garden that her family had maintained for generations. “I looked across the old field that I had worked in my young days and thought what a change would Soon take place,” wrote C. S. Anderson. “It is hard to realize that Such a think could hapen in a civilized country.”<sup>176</sup>

Residents of Ellenton, Dunbarton, and Meyers Mill moved into towns across the CSRA. In addition to Aiken and Augusta, Ellentonians moved to Jackson, North Augusta, and Barnwell. There was even a new town created in the area, appropriately named New Ellenton. Although many of the towns’ residents stayed within the CSRA,

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<sup>172</sup> Freeman, “15,000 in Carolina speed atom plant,” *New York Times*, October 3, 1951, 22.

<sup>173</sup> Browder, *Memories of Home: Dunbarton and Meyers Mill Remembered*, 164.

<sup>174</sup> Lang, “Camellias and H-Bombs,” 49.

<sup>175</sup> Browder, *Memories of Home: Reminiscences of Ellenton*, 163.

<sup>176</sup> Browder, *Memories of Home: Dunbarton and Meyers Mill Remembered*, 164.

the forced relocation spread the residents across a wide area and destroyed the sense of community that had been established in the displaced areas. Forty years after leaving Dunbarton, Eugenia Meyer Shipman lamented the death of her community. “I knew everybody in the area and how to go visit them,” she said. “Now they are scattered around and every once in a blue moon I will see somebody I know.”<sup>177</sup> Fred Stoney said, “I just loved everything about Dunbarton. It was home. Family moved into different areas. Family and friends were torn apart. I can’t see them as much.”<sup>178</sup>

Ellenton officially ended on March 1, 1952. For the residents of Ellenton, Dunbarton and Meyers Mill, the fifteen months that had followed the announcement had proven chaotic and heartbreaking. While Ellentonians had been allowed to remain in the town during that span, the Ellenton of the last fifteen months had been a different Ellenton, an *occupied* Ellenton. Nevertheless, the town’s citizens had clung to this new Ellenton as it proved to be the last vestige of the familiar in a rapidly changing world. With the official death of the community, the last of its residents would have to leave the town behind and begin life anew in a different town, and in many ways, a different world.

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid, 161.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

## CONCLUSION

Many of the residents of Ellenton made new lives in neighboring communities. The people of Aiken, Augusta, North Augusta, Beech Island, Jackson, and Barnwell welcomed the displaced into their towns. The town of New Ellenton was formed near Jackson and provided a new home for some of the displaced. While the displaced people of Ellenton may have begun new lives in these communities, they were always Ellentonians.

The first Ellenton reunion was held in 1972. Every year on the second Sunday in June, these displaced people gather to reminisce about the home they lost. As they share stories and family pictures over plates of barbecue, the joy of reuniting with long lost friends is undercut by the thought of what could have been. "I wish we didn't have this reunion," Kenneth Ellis said. "Instead, I wish we still had Ellenton."<sup>179</sup>

The people of Ellenton, Dunbarton, and Meyers Mill were forced to evacuate their homes and communities because their government deemed it a necessary measure to preserve the security and freedom of the United States. While many were devastated at the decision, their compliance reflects their awareness of the stark realities that faced the United States at the beginning of the Cold War. The American sacrifices of World War II seemed to be threatened by the Communist menace; if the United States and the Western world fell to communism, those sacrifices would have been for naught. With the fall of China, the Russian acquisition of an atomic bomb, Soviet spies infiltrating the

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<sup>179</sup> Josh Voorhees, "Former Ellenton residents reminisce," *The Aiken Standard*, June 11, 2007.

government, and the escalating Korean War, the free world seemed to be more threatened with each passing day. Although certainly heartbroken that theirs was the community to be sacrificed, the people of Ellenton showed a willingness to relinquish what they held so dearly for the sake of protecting their country.

There was a level of bitterness that resulted from the relocation of the residents of Ellenton. The slow process of home appraisals and the misrepresentation of the community by outsiders certainly caused a great deal of resentment and anger. But it is important to note that this anger seems to stem from what occurred after the decision was made and not from the decision itself. While Ellentonians were quite upset with those who sought to profit from their misfortune and those who misrepresented the community in the media, they never wavered in doing what was asked of them for the sake of national security.

The response of the residents of Ellenton reflects the way in which the South was changing in the postwar era. While a number of them expressed a desire to fight back in the immediate wake of the announcement, the majority of residents displayed a sense of patriotism in their declaration to do whatever was asked of them to defend the United States. Once fiercely resistant to federal intervention, the Southern projects of the New Deal led many Southern politicians to actively campaign for federal projects in their states. In addition to this, a sense of shared sacrifice in World War II had begun the process of Southern integration back into the United States. The South would retain a number of its cultural peculiarities and would doggedly defend segregation well into the 1970s, but the immediate postwar years brought a thawing of once cold relations between

the South and the rest of the United States. Wrote William T. Polk, “Clearly the South is simmering over the fires of mutation. It is becoming more industrialized and less rural, more standardized and less individualized, more American and less Southern.”<sup>180</sup>

The willingness of the people of Ellenton to sacrifice their homes and communities suggests a change in Southerners’ perceptions of themselves. While they were certainly Southerners, Ellentonians also recognized their duties as Americans. The Southern integration back into the United States that had begun with the New Deal and World War II only deepened with the Cold War. Soviet aggression made no distinctions between the North and the South; this shared threat brought with it a sense of cooperation in the United States. Major differences existed between the South and the rest of the Union, most notably the persistence of segregation in the South, but these differences were placed on the backburner in the face of a global threat.

The residents of Ellenton, Dunbarton, and Meyers Mill felt abandoned by some of their neighbors, but it is important to remember that the displaced who settled in the nearby communities were able to share in the economic benefits of the Savannah River Plant which citizens of Aiken and Augusta had celebrated. The plant served as the economic backbone of the community well into the 1980s. At its peak, it provided work for over 25,000 employees, including a number of residents from the displaced communities. Although the end of the Cold War and the massive cuts in defense funding which accompanied it reduced the plant’s economic importance to the community, the

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<sup>180</sup> William T. Polk, *Southern Accents: From Uncle Remus to Oak Ridge* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1954), 231.

population boom and economic stimulus that the Savannah River Plant brought to the CSRA allowed the area to thrive after the plant shut down its reactors. Augusta, which had a population of 70,000 in 1950, is now home to nearly 190,000 residents. Likewise, Aiken, a quiet community of just over 7,000 residents in 1950, currently has a population of nearly 30,000. The Savannah River Plant ushered in an age of economic prosperity across the area, the benefits of which could be felt by everyone, including the displaced.

The United States tested its first hydrogen bomb in November of 1952; the Soviet Union would test their first hydrogen bomb less than a year later. With both of the major superpowers in possession of a thermonuclear weapon, the stakes were raised considerably. On March 1, 1954, the United States conducted what is known as the BRAVO test. This testing of a hydrogen bomb yielded surprising results, producing an explosion 750 times that of the bomb dropped at Hiroshima and spreading radiation over an alarming range. The destructive power of the hydrogen bomb introduced the world to a new concept: Mutually Assured Destruction. Leaders around the world quickly realized “that there could be no rational use, in war, for a weapon of this size.”<sup>181</sup> The use of atomic weapons against the Soviet Union would almost certainly guarantee a similar response. Richard Rhodes wrote, “How many cities would a political leader be ready to lose? U.S. leaders were prepared to lose not one, whatever patriotic gore their advisers gushed.”<sup>182</sup> Politicians were forced to acknowledge that “a war fought with

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<sup>181</sup> Gaddis, *The Cold War*, 62, 63.

<sup>182</sup> Rhodes, *Dark Sun*, 585.

nuclear weapons could destroy what it was intended to defend.”<sup>183</sup> And yet, despite the knowledge that thermonuclear weapons could never be used without significant retaliation, military spending skyrocketed as the U.S. and the USSR plunged further into the nuclear arms race.

The sacrifice of the town of Ellenton is regrettable, but it helped produce an arsenal that prevented traditional warfare between the superpowers. The introduction of thermonuclear weapons changed the nature of diplomatic relations throughout the world and has prevented a Third World War. While the world may never escape the threat of global annihilation that these weapons pose, this danger forced the world’s superpowers to handle their differences through diplomatic means rather than armed confrontations. The peace born out of nuclear weapons may have been born from dread, but it is peace nonetheless. This global stability would be impossible without the sacrifice of Ellenton and its residents.

While Ellentonians were certainly asked to sacrifice a great deal, it is important to note that they were not asked to make the ultimate sacrifice. In the summer of 1951, P. H. Buckingham, a resident of Ellenton, told a reporter with *The New Yorker*, “We wanted an industry, but instead we all got drafted – men, women, and children.”<sup>184</sup> Buckingham’s sentiments express the devastation that the move caused, but they also serve as a reminder that Americans were being drafted to fight in Korea. The sacrifice asked of Ellentonians was great, but the United States has asked more from its citizens during times of crisis.

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<sup>183</sup> Gaddis, *The Cold War*, 65.

<sup>184</sup> Lang, “Camellias and H-Bombs,” 48.



Nevertheless, the sacrifice of Ellenton is extraordinary. The fate of Ellenton sheds light on the extent to which the United States was willing to go in order to preserve national security. The United States forced 7,000 citizens to vacate the homes and communities that their families had inhabited for generations in order to produce the ultimate weapon of mass destruction. The Soviet possession of atomic weaponry forced a quick response from the Truman administration, and the town of Ellenton was sacrificed as a result.

The story of Ellenton, South Carolina, has long served as little more than a footnote in American history. Historians of the New South and post-war industrialism have noted the importance of the Savannah River Site as a sign of economic progress in the region, but little attention has been given to the plight of those displaced or what their reaction says about the South and Southern identity. Likewise, historians of the Cold War have noted the Savannah River Site's importance in the production of tritium and the facilitation of an American thermonuclear arsenal, but few have analyzed the sacrifices made by the citizens of Ellenton, Dunbarton and Meyers Mill.

The acquisition of Ellenton by the federal government highlights a number of historical trends. The town's fate was the result of the Truman administration's decision to pursue thermonuclear weapons in order to maintain the United States' lone military advantage over the Soviet Union. The town was also greatly affected by the South's bid to entice industry into the region in the wake of World War II. The reactions of the residents of the condemned area expose a change in Southern identity in the face of the

threat of nuclear annihilation, while the reaction in neighboring cities exposes major economic changes in the South. From the announcement of the town's fate on November 28, 1950, until the town was officially closed on March 1, 1952, the residents of Ellenton found themselves in the center of a rapidly changing world. Caught in the middle of a steadily industrializing South and an international arms race, the residents of Ellenton sacrificed their home for the sake of a greater good.

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